新約 とある魔術の禁書目録⑯

上里翔流が消えてから三日。

次なる戦いに身をうつした上条だったが、その先に待ち受けていたのは、水着姿の食蜂操祈や御坂美琴をはじめとする、お嬢様だらけの常盤台中学だった……？

季節は冬。12月の学園都市——にもかかわらず、気温は摂氏50度を超えていた。原因不明の大熱波により、学園都市のインフラ全てが機能停止する中、その『予測不能な脅威』はやってきた。

エレメント。

灼熱地獄を這う異形の化け物。ヤツらに唯一対抗できる『右手』でもって、上条は激戦地へ向かうも多勢に無勢。そんな窮地に現れたのは、異形の機械『対魔術式駆動鎧』に包まれたあの少女で……？

新約
とある魔術の禁書目録
インデックス
16
鎌池和馬
イラスト／はいむらきよたか
電撃文庫

か-12-72

新約 とある魔術の禁書目録⑯

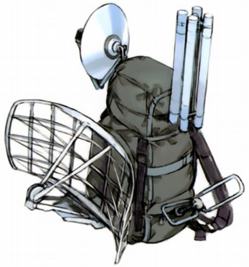
鎌池和馬

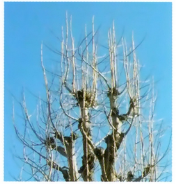
電撃文庫

ISBN978-4-04-892251-7
C0193 ¥670E

定価：本体 670円（税別）

KADOKAWA
ASCII MEDIA WORKS
アスキー・メディアワークス





鎌池和馬

学園都市自体は旧一三巻などでも機能停止はしているのですが、改めて壊してみると、やっぱり知らず知らずの内に守りに入っていたんだなあと痛感するばかりです。もっと頑張らなくては。

【電撃文庫作品】

とある魔術の禁書目録①～㉒
とある魔術の禁書目録SS①②
新約 とある魔術の禁書目録①～⑯
ヘヴィーオブジェクト シリーズ計11冊
インテリビレッジの座敷童 全⑨巻
簡単なアンケートです
簡単なモニターです
ヴァルトラウテさんの婚活事情
未踏召喚：// ブラッドサイン①～⑤
とある魔術のヘヴィーな座敷童が簡単な殺人妃の婚活事情
最強をこじらせたレベルカンスト剣聖女ベアトリーチェの弱点①～②
その名は『ぶーぶー』
とある魔術の禁書目録×電脳戦機バーチャロン とある魔術の電脳戦機

イラスト：はいむらきよたか

広島の片田舎で、もそもそ絵を描いております。

「……何もこんな所で作業せんでも」
異能の力を打ち消す『幻想殺し（イマジンブレイカー）』宿す少年
上条当麻（かみじょう・とうま）

「この子、とにかく物覚えが良いのよね」
上条のクラスメイトにして『対カミジョー属性完全ガードの女』
吹寄制理（ふきよせ・せいり）

「頼まれていたブツを作っているんだよ！」
脳内に一〇万三〇〇〇冊の魔道書を保存する完全記憶シスター（大食らい）
インデックス

新約 とある魔術の禁書目録
インデックス
16

鎌池和馬
イラスト／
はいむらきよたか

contents

10 序　章　水着で始める学校籠城　Melt_the_Asphalt.

40 第一章　灼熱で続ける安全確保　Water_Hunt.

118 第二章　お嬢と進める拠点攻略　Tower_of_the_Crystal.

236 第三章　宿敵と交わす協力要請　Double_Enemy.

316 第四章　破滅を伝える急転直下　Operation_Right_Hand.

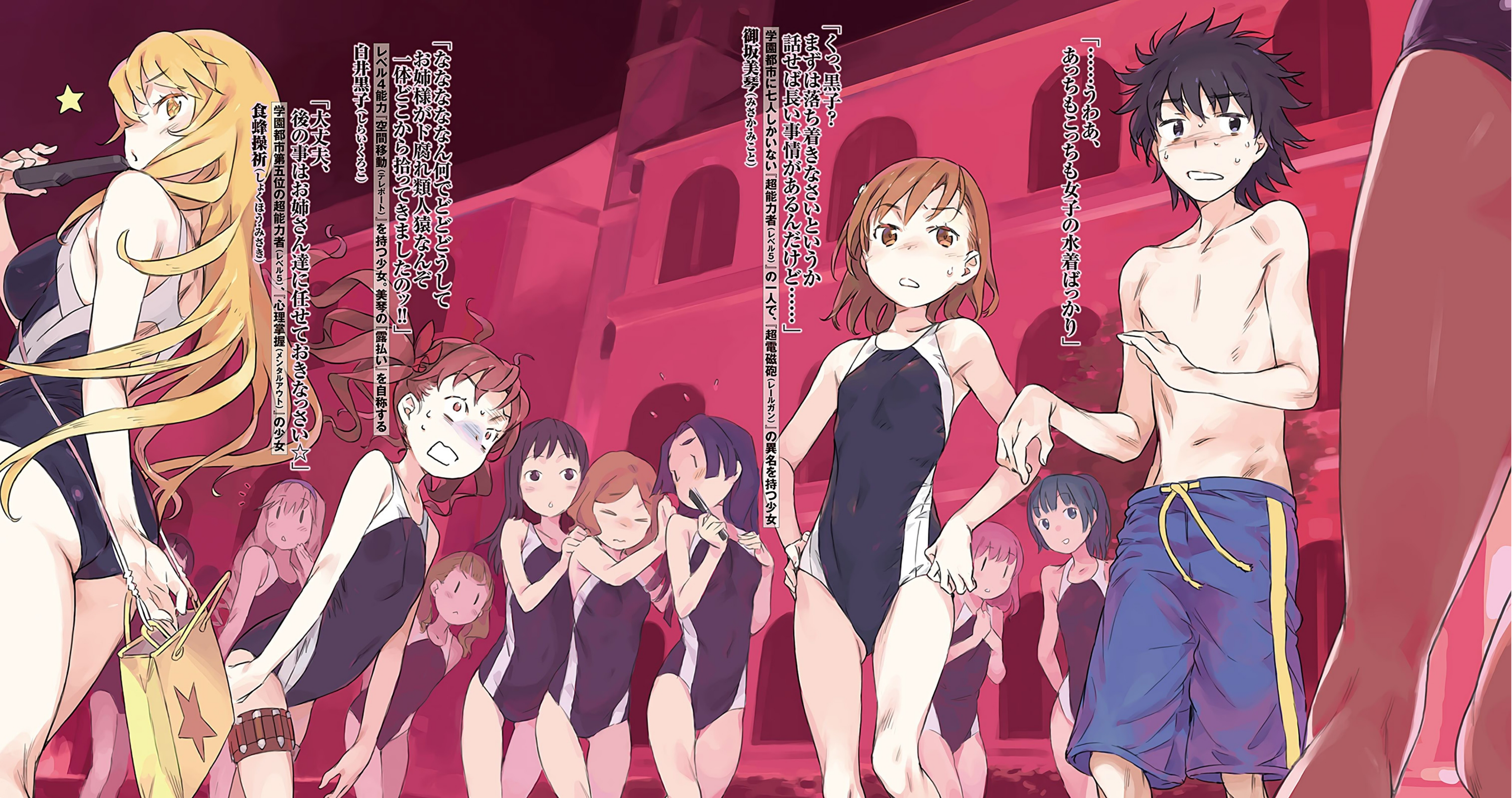
358 終　章　災厄を超える模範解答　Nightmare_by_Lost_Boy.

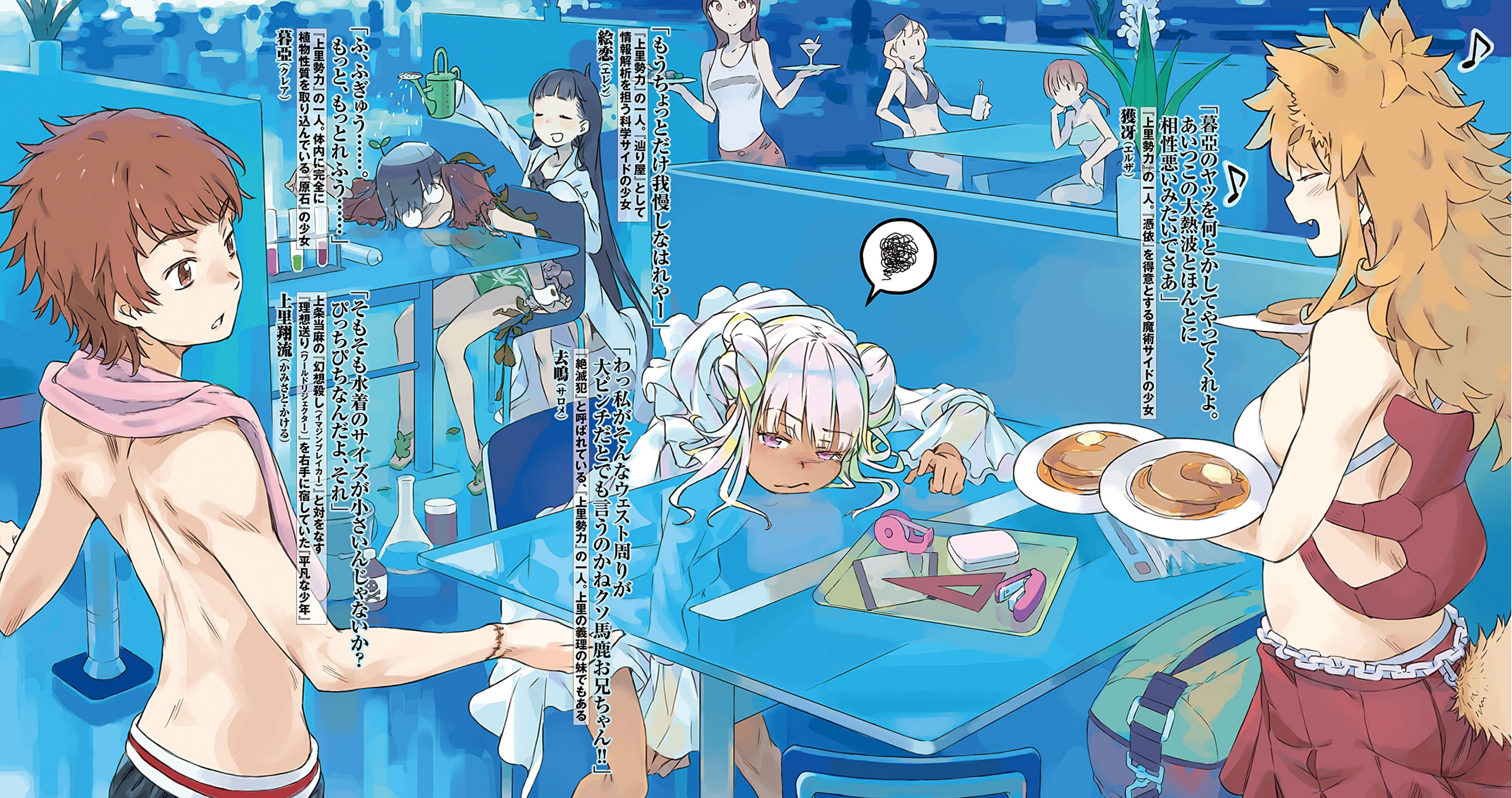
「分かればよしです」

『上里勢力』である女の子軍団の一人。自称UFO少女

府蘭（フラン）

Designed by Hirokazu Watanabe(2725 Inc.)


『……うわあ、あっちもこっちも女子の水着ばっかり』
『くっ、黒子？まずは落ち着きなさいというか話せば長い事情があるんだけど……』
御坂美琴（みさか・みこと）
学園都市に七人しかいない『超能力者（レベル5）』の一人で、『超電磁砲（レールガン）』の異名を持つ少女
『なななななん何でどどどどうしてお姉様がド腐れ類人猿なんぞ一体どこから拾ってきましたのッ!!』
白井黒子（しらい・くろこ）
レベル4能力『空間移動（テレポート）』を持つ少女。美琴の『露払い』を自称する
『大丈夫、後の事はお姉さん達に任せておきなっさい☆』
食蜂操祈（しょくほう・みさき）
学園都市第五位の超能力者（レベル5）、『心理掌握（メンタルアウト）』の少女



「暮亞のヤツを何とかしてやってくれよ。あいつこの大熱波とほんとに相性悪いみたいでさあ」

獲冴（エルザ）

『上里勢力』の一人。『憑依』を得意とする魔術サイドの少女

「もうちょっとだけ我慢しなはれやー」

絵恋（エレン）

『上里勢力』の一人。『辿り屋』として情報解析を担う科学サイドの少女

「わっ私がそんなウェスト周りが大ピンチだとでも言うのかねクソ馬鹿お兄ちゃん!!」

去鳴（サロメ）

『絶滅犯』と呼ばれている、『上里勢力』の一人。上里の義理の妹でもある

「そもそも水着のサイズが小さいんじゃないか？ぴっちぴちなんだよ、それ」

上里翔流（かみさと・かける）

上条当麻の『幻想殺し（イマジンブレイカー）』と対をなす『理想送り（ワールドリジェクター）』を右手に宿していた『平凡な少年』

「ふ、ふぎゅう……。もっと、もっとれふう……」

暮亞（クレア）

『上里勢力』の一人。体内に完全に植物性質を取り込んでいる『原石』の少女

Prologue: Holing Up at School, Starting with Swimsuits – Melt_the_Asphalt.

It was December 7 in Academy City’s District 7.

However, the digital temperature display on a building wall was stuck at 55 degrees Celsius. It was something like an empty cicada skin at this point, so who could say how much further the temperature had risen.

The intense heat wave made it feel like being trapped in a stone stove full of residual heat.

Kamijou Touma and his classmates had been thrown out into that scorching hell that was just about causing the asphalt roads to ooze.

“Pant, pant.”

They gasped for breath and wiped sweat from their brows, but they were not wearing their school uniforms. Any sticklers for the rules who had tried to do that had collapsed from heatstroke before the first day was over. All of the boys and girls were wearing their choice of swimsuit to avoid trapping in any heat.

They currently stood on the rooftop of one of the countless multi-tenant buildings lining the street.

They did not even think about casually walking along the ground.

Anyone who touched the ground would die.

“This is…no joke…dammit.”

A heavy sensation pressed down on their backs.

They were carrying fifty kilogram weights, which was like carrying a small girl around. Those weights were the mineral water left in a large drug store. All of the visible shelves had long since been wiped out, but in the back office, they had found a few Daruma doll-like plastic tanks for the water dispenser.

That might seem like more than enough water for a single person, but even a home bathtub could hold two hundred kilograms. This was far from enough to hydrate the entire school they were using for shelter. It was entirely inadequate, but they could not give up trying either.

Far below, the direct sunlight had heated the road like a stone stove and the wind turbines were sparking. There were a few cracks in the road and the fire hydrants had broken, but not even a single drop of water was flowing out anymore. The roadside trees had turned brown due to something other than the winter season.

It was all about the heat. That had ruined everything.

Whether it used gasoline or mercury, a car was useless if its battery did not work. Ditto for the new acrobikes. The unmanned devices like cleaning robots were also no help.

Fukiyose Seiri, a classmate with long black hair and an exposed forehead (and giant breasts) similarly wiped away sweat next to Kamijou. Even a well-regulated and excellent student like her had lost the second round of The North Wind and the Sun. She currently wore her own personal black bikini and she wore a wool scarf and gloves over that.

There was of course a reason for that strange combination.

While Kamijou and the other boys carried the incredibly heavy water, the girls had to work to secure a route for them.

“We’ll be using the ladder to reach the next building. We’ll reach a major road after that, so we’ll have to use a tightrope.”

“Not again. This is so dangerous.”

“Just so you know, they use ladders to cross crevasses on Everest.”

Even if these were short multi-tenant buildings, they were still four or five stories tall.

The class was spreading out a folding ladder and using that to cross between buildings. And that was while carrying fifty kilograms of water.

This was why Fukiyose and the other girls were wearing gloves and scarves. It was over 55 degrees Celsius. A comedian’s hot water bath was only in the realm of 50 degrees. And the metal parts were even worse after absorbing the heat. They could not touch them barehanded for extended periods, so they needed the kind of gloves used to hold pots. The scarves were used to carry the ladder over their shoulders. Most of them wore sandals with straps. Sneakers or boots would have been more convenient, but not when it was this hot. Poorly ventilated shoes would quickly fill with sweat and their feet would soon be moist with athlete’s foot.

In all honesty, Kamijou could not get used to crossing the “crevasses” no matter how many times he did it.

“Let’s get going,” said Fukiyose. “One at a time. And be careful.”

“…Dammit. If only we had a sturdier bridge.”

“If we choose the safest routes, we might run across an ambush of people after that water you’re carrying.”

Kamijou, who wore a swimsuit that looked like shorts, glared bitterly up at the sun which had become a deadly weapon.

The world had changed in just three days. A ridiculously unnatural heat wave had attacked Academy City and all of the electricity and plumbing had been *knocked out* almost too easily. The city had a set of values that generally made class divisions based on academic ability and income, but that had collapsed and something else had risen to take its place.

Simply put, water and shade.

At this point, people could easily start fighting over those things like they were stacks of cash or gold bars.

“We don’t know what’s happened to the other schools since the heat took out all the electronics and network lines, but we should count ourselves lucky that we haven’t dried up yet,” said Fukiyose.

“Do you think there are schools that really did run out of water and dry up?”

“I don’t want to think about it. Anyway, I’ll be going across first.”

When crossing the crevasses, one would send the lighter people first to confirm the other side was safe. In this case, that was the girls who were not carrying water.

They crossed the ladder from building to building. It was less than five meters long, but balancing on two feet and walking across like with a normal bridge or tightrope would be a deadly mistake. They naturally got down on all fours and grabbed on with their hands and legs to slowly crawl across.

This was a serious situation with lives on the line, but Fukiyose ended up sticking up the soft butt contained inside her black bikini bottom. On top of that, the heat meant there was plenty of sweat dripping down her inner thighs, so it made for quite a juicy scene.

Aogami Pierce put on a serious expression as he carried another of the spare water dispenser bottles.

“I’m sorry, Kami-yan. I don’t think I can hide it while wearing a swimsuit.”

“Cough, cough! Bear with it, boy!! I doubt those girls would understand our struggle!!”

The two of them did their best to look away from the seduction before their eyes, but that brought the scorching surface into view.

The colorless shimmering of a mirage rose from the asphalt which was getting a little melty in the intense heat.

"*Do you think there are even more of them now?*"

"Who knows. I don't feel like counting them."

Kamijou sounded annoyed as he answered and he saw Fukiyose waving back at them after safely crossing over. After confirming the safety of the other side, the other girls began crossing the ladder one after another.

"We can't use electricity, so fire's really our only option."

"Yeah."

"But I really don't want to start a fire right now. There'd be no way to put it out."

"I've heard they used to throw sand on fires to put them out."

There were in fact dark lines rising into the blue sky from different parts of the scorching city. They had no way of knowing if they were cooking fires, smoke signals to send an SOS, or signs of a collapsed community.

A Tokiwadai Middle School girl's face flashed through the back of his mind.

Was she doing all right in this hell? While she was Academy City's #3 Level 5, that did not seem like it meant much as far as direct physical strength, water, and stamina were concerned.

(I can still worry about others. Does that mean I'm still human?)

Kamijou shook his head in annoyance and focused on the reality before his eyes.

A triple digit number of students from the first year were out searching for water, but they had split up when choosing actual routes. Only a single class's worth was here with him, but it was still enough to create a bottleneck when crossing a ladder one at a time.

Kamijou and Aogami Pierce both leaned forward onto the horizontal ladder and attempted to crawl across. As they crossed the scorching metal, Kamijou's awful friend spoke to him.

"Okay, let's do this just like all the other times. No holding a grudge if we fall."

"Right."

Given the unreliable creaking coming from the ladder and the weight of the water on their backs, they were in no mental state to be joking around, but their short experience at this had already taught them that a heavy silence would put an even greater pressure on their hearts.

They were four or five stories up.

Deadly asphalt awaited them below. If they fell, they would either die instantly or meet a much longer and much more painful fate.

(Don't worry, don't worry. They use this method on Everest and a mountain climber carries much more than fifty kilograms. So there's nothing to worry about.)

The unstable creaking sound continued below him. He felt like each step was the same as snipping one of the colorful cords in a time bomb.

The sweat on his brow was an annoyance. The heat roasting his palms was a nuisance too.

Every drop of water was precious, but his hands and feet were soaked and he felt like he was going to slip off at any time.

The sweat got in his eyelids.

The scene around him blurred as if he was growing teary-eyed. But in this unstable situation, he could not wipe it away with the back of his hand. A vague emptiness filled his mind as he relied only on the sensation coming from his hands to slowly guide him across the five meters from hell.

"…jou, Kamijou! It's okay now. You made it across!!"

Fukiyose shouted something into his ear, so he breathed out the excess of oxygen filling his lungs. He ignored the burning heat as he collapsed onto his side. He used his entire body to let in the stability of solid ground.

"Pant, pant…!!!???"

"Looks like we both survived again. Although this is something like playing Russian roulette."

Aogami Pierce sat down and wiped the sweat from his brow.

As they waited for the rest to cross, Kamijou slowly got up and spoke to Black Bikini Fukiyose.

"You said we have to use a tightrope next, right?"

"Yes. I'm honestly afraid of an ambush since it's a set route, but five meters is the most we can cross with the ladder. The tightropes are necessary to cross the major roads."

Electronics were useless in this heat.

Fukiyose pulled out a paper emergency map with several lines drawn in using colorful marker. She folded it like someone reading a newspaper on the train and she read through it. The lines crossing roads from building to building were all "tightropes".

"I thought some kunoichi manga said you couldn't cross them like a bridge due to tension or something," commented Aogami.

"What's known as the world's most dangerous route to school requires walking across a single wire for a kilometer or two. This is far better than that."

After everyone had crossed, Fukiyose and the rest of the girls set to work retrieving the ladder. Kamijou's group also stood up and began battling the heavy water once more.

They looked into the distance and saw something unusual in the otherwise familiar city.

There was something crossing between the buildings.

Some went from rooftop to rooftop, some went from window to window, and some connected emergency staircase landings.

They were all “tightropes”. In other words, they were wire slides. Wires of various thicknesses were strung between buildings. Attached to them were pulleys made by attaching a small roller skate or skateboard wheel to a somewhat bent version of the thick S-shaped hooks that held up large tools in a garage. By hanging down from the pulley, one could slide straight down across the wire. That said, they were handmade with no standard safety features, so there was no guarantee they were safe.

However, it was far preferable to the unstable ladder or a gamble of a pole vault. This was much like how the safe portion of the blowfish had been discovered. No one wanted to think about how many failures had led to the right answer.

There were also bricks and concrete blocks piled up on the roofs, but they were likely unrelated to the tightropes.

Thick wires extended from several stories of the building they were on, but the one headed toward their school looked really rundown. First of all, it was not made of metal. It had been tied together from synthetic fiber ropes and it had only been strung up using something like a hand-cranked winch. And even though the tightropes were one-way tickets due to the height difference, a way back had not been made. They could get to the other side, but they could not return. They would have to search for another route if it came to that.

“Wait, wait, wait, wait…”

“They just used a gas-powered launcher or something to fire the rope to the other side. Since they didn't fire one back, they must have given up partway through."

The tightropes were made out of necessity. Whatever school they were from, if whoever had done this had given up, it might mean something unexpected had happened to them.

Regardless, Kamijou's class could not just wait around.

They could not take endless detours either. *They wanted to get back to the safety of the school as soon as possible.* Kamijou and everyone else there had to feel that way.

It was dangerous, but they had no other choice.

Unlike with the ladder, they did not have to go one at a time.

First, Kamijou attached a handmade pulley (made from a roller skate wheel and the kind of S-shaped hook that held up large tools in a garage) to the overhead wire and grabbed onto the handle with both hands. From there, he just had to use the strength of his grip to hang down from it. The height was frightening, but coming to a stop partway down was an even scarier thought. That was why he gave it a running start.

And before he crossed, Fukiyose passed her arms through the ladder to hold it in place as she used a pulley to skillfully board the tightrope.

These set routes were sturdier, but there was more chance of an ambush. It was safest to send multiple people across right away.

Or it should have been.

The tightrope suddenly shook and pointed straight down.

"Wah!!"

"Kami-yan!?"

The synthetic fiber rope supporting the tightrope snapped.

Had the heat weakened it? Or had there been too much frictional heat even with the pulley?

There was nothing he could do. The S-shaped pulley was useless with his full weight bearing down on it, so he fell along the path of the snapped wire. He ran into Fukiyose who was also on the tightrope. Knowing it would burn his palm, he grabbed the wire and used his other hand to grab the black bikini girl's hand before she was thrown off.

They swung like a giant pendulum rather than falling straight down.

But that was lucky because their momentum was transferred to the horizontal vector and they at least avoided dying on impact. Kamijou and Fukiyose fell and rolled along the scorching ground.

"Ghhh!!"

Fortunately, they were thrown onto a dried-out flower bed instead of the road. Thanks to that, they avoided having the asphalt tear at their exposed skin like a file.

Kamijou held Fukiyose in one arm and slapped her cheek.

"Hey, are you okay, Fukiyose!? We're still alive!!"

"Ah, ahh…?"

The mental shock of falling must have blanked out her mind because Fukiyose groaned in confusion as he held her.

And this was no time to be breathing a sigh of relief.

They were on the ground.

Anyone who fell would die.

Aogami Pierce placed his hands around his mouth like a megaphone and shouted down from the rooftop.

“Hurry up and get outta there, Kami-yan!! *An Element is coming!!*”

Something cast a giant shadow on Kamijou.

He looked back to find it was very close, less than two meters away.

The bizarre-shaped creature was made of translucent crystal and stood easily three meters tall. It resembled a giant mantis and had just raised its front leg like a large scythe.

There had been no sign of the thing just a moment ago.

And due to their translucent bodily structure, the Elements tended to take the shape of plants or animals that used some form of mimicry.

In this case, it was a Class 1 Flower Mantis.

"!! Fukiyoseeeeeeeeeeee!?"

He immediately shoved away the girl in his arms.

The force of the push sent him in the opposite direction just as the dreadful strike swung down at them. The dried flower bed the dazed boy and girl had occupied was mercilessly sliced in two as the translucent scythe stabbed as deep as the concrete foundation.

Something like a red will-o'-the-wisp burned in the center of its transparent chest.

(A fire Element. That's standard but dangerous!!)

The other scythe came with a color.

It glowed with the orange of a blast furnace.

With the low roar of a fire consuming oxygen, cruel flames wrapped around the attack. Fire with the stickiness of heavy oil burst out in a half circle.

Without Imagine Breaker in his right hand, he would have been turned to ashes.

“Ah, ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

He held his right hand forward on reflex and the entire twenty meter blast of fire shattered into nothingness. Just the residual heat scorching his cheeks was enough to squeeze at his heart.

He had just about died.

No, he had just about been intentionally killed.

A moment later…

“Kami-yan!!”

Aogami Pierce shouted down from above. No, he did more than just shout. With heavy sounds of impact, he and the others threw concrete blocks and bricks down on the Element.

“There’s an ‘elevator’ on a building wall a hundred meters west of here! We’ll buy you some time, so take Fukiyose and get back up here!!”

Kamijou looked over and did indeed see a single rope hanging along a building wall. The bottom was tied into a noose-like loop. By placing one’s foot in that and grabbing the rope, someone at the top could drop a drum of sand to pull them up using the pulley at the top.

The Elements could climb stairs, but they seemed unable to use ladders or ropes. Similarly, they could destroy doors and windows, but they were not intelligent enough to pry open locks or turn knobs.

That meant they could be somewhat avoided by escaping to elevated places or hiding behind bomb-resistant doors.

(But…)

He looked back again.

Black Bikini Fukiyose was lying defenselessly beyond the three meter Flower Mantis. Simply sharing the same space as an Element numbed his mind with a premonition of death. Could he get past the Flower Mantis, reach her, and then escape to the distant “elevator”?

Getting taken out from behind was the most likely outcome.

And it would be even worse if it happened to a familiar classmate.

“Aogami!! Keep throwing the bricks!!”

“Wait, wait, wait! Don’t even think about taking on an Element, Kami-yan! There’ll be no end to them, dammit!!”

Kamijou was not thinking about wiping them out or mopping them up.

This Flower Mantis Element had a core of fire inside it.

If he could at least eliminate that, he could safely reach the elevator with Fukiyose. He could avoid having to lose anyone. And he had already proven that Imagine Breaker worked on the Element’s flames.

Plus, if he could just touch it with his right hand, he could one-shot the Element itself.

But its movements were too deadly, so he could easily be torn to pieces the instant he tried to face it one-on-one.

A few times already, they had needed to save students who had fallen down. The others had thrown stones to buy time while Kamijou challenged and defeated the smaller Elements.

That should still work with this Class 1 that stood three meters tall.

“Gweaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

To keep the fear from pinning his feet to the ground, Kamijou roared at the top of his lungs like hammer throwers did to release the limiters in their brains. He ran toward the translucent Flower Mantis. He did not care how pathetic it made him look. As long as he could touch it somewhere, the Element would stop, as if its battery had died.

But.

That was when the Flower Mantis's surface shimmered like a mirage.

No, that was not what happened. The scenery would shimmer when an Element was moving while blending into the background. They were translucent to begin with and they specialized in mimicry.

That meant this shimmering was not caused by the Flower Mantis launching an attack.

It came from something in front of it.

There was another one!?

"K-Kamijou! Wait!!!???"

As she sat on the scorching asphalt, Fukiyose gave a panicked and wide-eyed shout.

But it was too late.

Kamijou Touma had set his sights on the Flower Mantis and rushed forward, so he could not change direction now.

And…

It was a Class 2. At twice the size of the Flower Mantis, the six meter Element had a diamond shaped shell and giant pincers. It was modeled after a hishigani crab.

And this Element did not hold back on using its greatest weapon.

It was more like a body blow than a blade.

The tip of its giant pincer slammed into the center of Kamijou Touma’s gut.

There was nothing he could do.

“Bh.”

He coughed up blood instead of air.

He felt the liquid rising deep in his throat as he was thrown backwards with twice his forward momentum. He could not sense the fall and the impact of collision. His limbs and even his eyeballs were convulsing and he had no idea where he was or even which way was up. His back felt wet, but was that due to the water dispenser tank breaking from the impact or was it simply his own blood?

The rest came in bits and pieces.

His mind was filled with the stench and taste of blood, Fukiyose Seiri’s scream, a downpour of flash grenades and smokescreens made from bottles as they were thrown down from the rooftop, a voice calling his name while slapping his cheeks over and over, the sensation of being dragged, and the floating sensation of the pulley elevator.

“Kamijou! Snap out of it, Kamijou!!”

He had been carried to some rooftop or another.

Fukiyose Seiri seemed to be the one calling his name. That knowledge was enough for him to smile a little even as his body’s convulsions continued.

Thank goodness, he thought.

He was relieved to know her scream had not been due to the Element getting her too.

He was glad for that good news at least.

“Wait, don’t get that satisfied look on your face. We’re not even close to being done here yet!! This isn’t over! Stay focused, Kamijou!! You have to!!”

It was not quite accurate to say her voice was growing more distant.

It would be more accurate to say the mass of sound was striking his eardrums, but its meaning was not reaching his brain. It was like a classmate’s words vanishing into the general chatter of the class as a whole.

After that, Kamijou realized something.

So that’s it, he thought as a possibility occurred to him.

Could this be outside the real timeline?

Is my life flashing before my eyes? Am I lying in bed and desperately thinking back over my most recent memories?

Between the Lines 1

Hamazura Shiage had been heading out early in the morning of late. Even he had trouble believing it was to go jogging. But this was not an admirable attempt to regain as much of his health as he could after wearing it down with alcohol and cigarettes. And it certainly had nothing at all to do with Takitsubo Rikou, his girlfriend in a pink track suit, flatly telling him he was starting to get a gut.

He had washed his hands of Skill Out, but he still had not the slightest idea what to do with the time that had freed up. This may have been something meant to fill that gap inside him. And he was fully aware that someone on the straight and narrow would say he should go to school if he had really had a change of heart.

For better or for worse, he had built up his leg muscles and his stamina…or he felt like he had.

Out of the twenty-three districts, District 7 had the greatest area. If he could stick to his own pace, he could run a full circuit of that district without taking a break.

…Or he should have been able to.

“Dammit…what is with this heat?”

He did not even make it five hundred meters. His feet slowed to a stop and he felt woozy. Was this heatstroke or sleep deprivation? He had been woken in the middle of the night by *a weird explosion* in the area. But when he leaned against a nearby building wall, his entire body was assaulted by the heat and pain of a frying pan, so he quickly pulled back.

He glanced down at his cellphone, but the display was all weird and would not respond.

He had left before seven and it was early December. He should have been able to see his breath and there should have been ice needles in the sidewalk flower beds, but there was no sign of that. In fact, he was pretty sure this heat would cause an Okinawan mangrove to shrivel up.

“Hi, Hamazura-kun.”

“Hey.”

He bowed to the old man he had come to recognize during this new morning ritual. The man should have been walking his dog, but the heat had put a stop to that. The dog was sitting on a bus stop bench. It may have been too hot for the dog to sit or lie on the asphalt.

“What is with this weather? Have you heard anything, Hamazura-kun? Kids these days are looking everything up on the internet, right?”

“I suppose…”

Hamazura felt like the idea that you could learn or do anything on the internet was a deception promoted by the people who adjusted what information was available at what time, but there was no point in explaining that.

“I haven’t heard anything. Did they say anything in the newspapers?”

“Hah hah. Why do young people think everyone past a certain age reads every last article on the newspaper?”

Hamazura just about snapped back that the old man had just made the exact same kind of assumption.

“Anyway, maybe I should cut today’s walk short.”

“Probably.”

“This girl may be a dog, but she’s so fat. Of course, that’s because I give her so many treats. Carrying her back isn’t going to be easy. But I can’t have her walk on the asphalt like this. What to do?”

"Why not use the underground tunnels?"

"Underground tunnels?"

Hamazura answered the confused voice by pointing his thumb toward some nearby stairs heading down.

"They connect the subway stations with the department stores, so they can take you pretty far. Of course, you have to plan out your course and navigate something like a labyrinth if you want to reach the exact exit you want."

"Hm. I didn't know that."

The old man turned his head while sitting on the bus stop bench, but then his gaze came to a stop. He froze up when his eyes reached a certain point.

"?"

Curious, Hamazura looked back too.

A group of office workers in business suits ran up the stairs. There were a lot of them. The morning rush hour should not have begun quite yet, so this group was oddly large.

(Will I have to push my way through crowds like that when I grow up?)

That was still how Hamazura viewed the scene.

But that view would change three seconds later.

It began with the handkerchiefs. Due to the heat, a lot of the office workers were holding handkerchiefs. They were pressing them to their faces and the backs of their hands.

At first, he thought they were wiping away sweat.

But then what was that red color seeping out from the cloth?

"Gyah! Wah, wah!!"

"Gau, gau!! Chatter, chatter, chatter!!"

"Ohhhhhhh!! Ohhhhhhhhhhhn!!"

In all likelihood that was not actually what they were shouting, but that was all he could hear with so many yelling voices blending together.

"This isn't good, Hamazura-kun."

Hamazura suddenly found the old man had stood up from the bench. He was holding the dog in his arms despite his earlier complaint about the weight.

"I-is someone attacking them? Things are so dangerous these days."

When were "these days"? The old man used the same line people had been using for half a century at this point.

And his assumption was wrong.

Hamazura's ears…no, brain gradually managed to process the shouts and screams. They were converted into comprehensible words.

"Gyah! What!? Wah! A bug…!?"

"Gaaah!! Stay…back! Gyaaaaaah!!"

Had it really been a problem with the sound itself or had his mind simply refused to accept the answer?

"What…is that…huge bug!?"

"It's…coming this way! It's chasing us!!"

He had a feeling that was what they were actually saying.

But now that he had the answer, he had to accept it.

"M-monster! Dammit, run away! Everyone run away! You'll be killed!!"

The crowd split to the left and right as it tried to run up the stairs from underground. No, it was knocked to the left and right. Something unseen and nearly invisible used its great mass to charge through. A portion of the scenery immediately shimmered like a mirage. Something like a giant mantis seemed to appear out of thin air.

It was more than three meters tall and made of a crystal-like translucent substance.

The upside-down triangle of its head rapidly turned and it focused on a single point with the emotionless eyes of an insect.

It focused on Hamazura and the old man a short distance away.

“Wh-what the hell is that!?”

As Hamazura started to step back, he ran into something.

It was another one.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

As soon as he screamed and dove to the ground with all his might, a gust of wind swept by. His balls shriveled up when he belatedly realized that was the swinging of a scythe larger than a Japanese sword. *Shit. This is even worse than running into a crocodile or a bear,* he thought, with no clue if that nature knowledge was accurate or not. This was no time to worry about the frying pan heat of the asphalt. He continued rolling to get as far away as possible.

And then…

“H-Hamazura-kuuuun!!”

The old man’s pathetic voice reached his ears. Concerned, he looked over from the ground and saw the old man being pulled away by a ferocious force. …But instead of the mysterious crystal mantis, it was the dog’s leash tugging him away.

“I get the feeling that old man’s gonna survive another hundred years.”

With that comment, Hamazura hopped up from the ground.

“Shit!!”

He ran as fast as his feet would take him in an attempt to get as far away as possible from the crystal mantises and flood of officer workers.

“Oh, goddammit!!”

He heard strange heavy footsteps behind him, but he did not have time to look back.

“Why!? Why do they always have to come after meeeee!!!???”

Chapter 1: Securing Safety in the Scorching Heat – Water_Hunt.

Part 1

“Bah, gwah….!!!???”

Instead of lying on a bed, Kamijou Touma felt more like he was reaching both hands up from the bottom of a full bathtub. The voices and sounds around him were muffled and oddly distorted, like there was a thick layer of water between them and him.

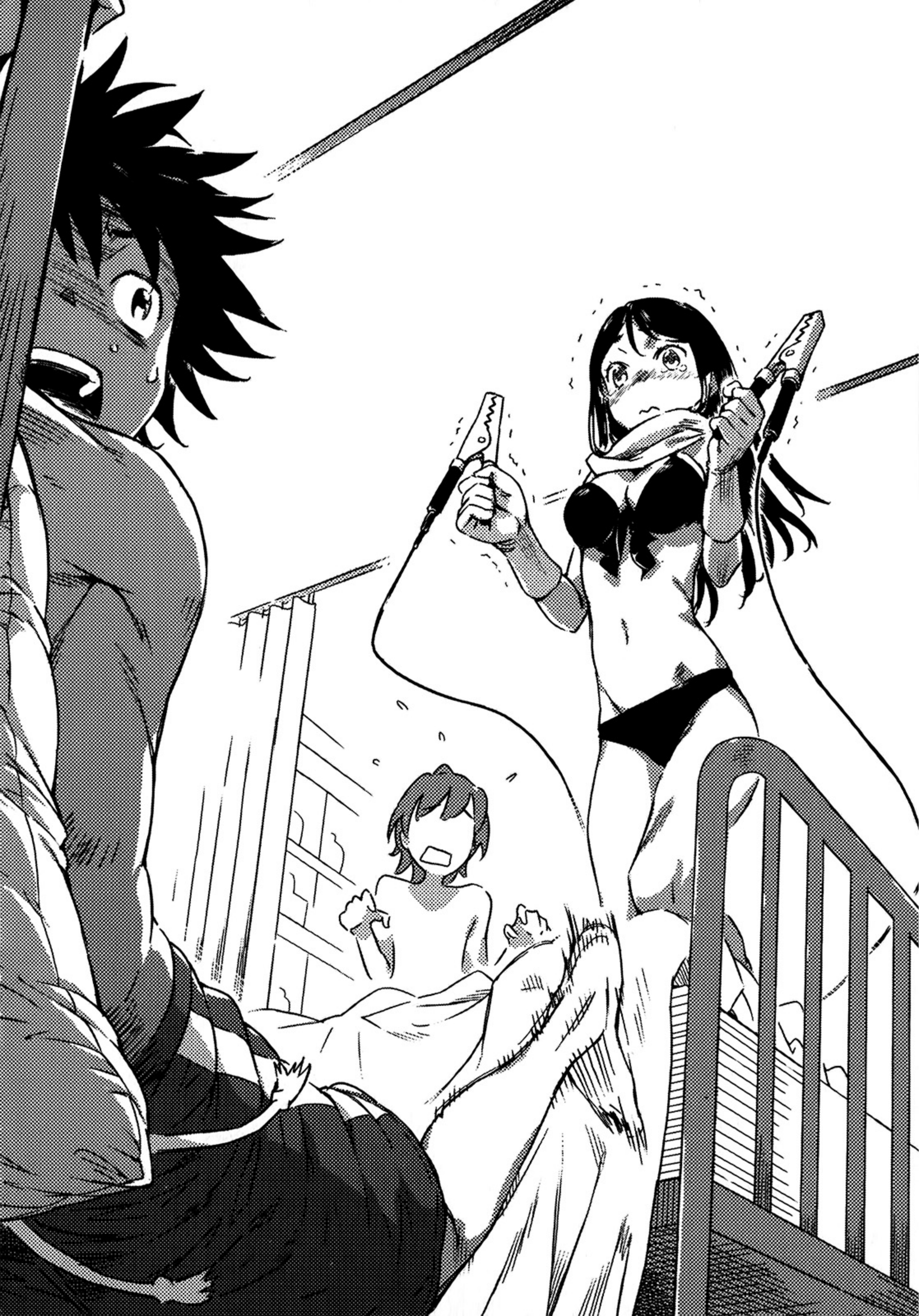
His vision was just a strange array of colors as voices reached him from the surrounding chatter.

“We have a reading, but it’s weak! Give him another countershock!!”

“You’re kidding, right? We’re lucky this car battery still worked after expanding so much from the heat. If we keep this up, Kami-yan might explode…”

“But we know he’ll die if we don’t do anything! Stand back!!”

With a tremendous shock, Kamijou’s entire body formed an arch. A scorching heat started in his heart and spread to every part of his body. It felt like having silk wadding removed from his throat. His pointy-haired head finally left the phantom bathtub and he could breathe oxygen into his own lungs.



“Cough, agh…!? What…? This is…the infirmary?”

When he shook his unsteady head and looked around, he saw Fukiyose in her black bikini and Aogami Pierce in his swim trunks. Frighteningly enough, teary-eyed Fukiyose held large crocodile clips in her hands. The cables were connected to a car battery that had swelled out like a black melon.

“Y-you’ve got to be kidding me. I’m not an ecofriendly hybrid…”

“Do you!! Have any idea!! How worried we were!? You don’t get to just quit while you’re ahead!!”

“Gyaaaah!! I get that you’re feeling emotional, but let go of the clips before hugging me!!”

Kamijou just about set sail for Nirvana once more, but he somehow avoided becoming an electric roast.

They had somehow survived. He and Fukiyose were both safe.

In that case, he knew what to worry about first.

“What happened to the water?”

That was when a modest knock came to the infirmary door.

After the door cracked open, the Jumpy Bunny and a glasses boy poked their heads in. They belonged to the student council of the school from which Kamijou and the others were borrowing classrooms after losing their own school. They also must have succumbed to the heat because the small Jumpy Bunny was facing this crisis in a frilly pink one piece and the glasses boy had for some reason chosen a speedo.

They were holding a few 500mL bottles.

“W-we’ve already distributed the water to everyone. This is your share.”

"Don't tell anyone, but you all get just a bit more since you put in the most work."

Kamijou sighed and slowly got up from the bed.

He grimaced as a dull pain ran through his bandaged lower stomach and Aogami Pierce frantically called out to him.

"H-hey, Kami-yan…"

"I'm fine. I can't hog a bed in such a nice place forever. The people taken out by heatstroke are all inside the stuffy gym, right? I can't waste this space on myself."

That was why Tsukuyomi Komoe, Yomikawa Aiho, and the rest of the teachers were not here. They would want to put an end to the students' dangerous behavior, but they had their hands full taking care of the sick and could not patrol the school building very well. If they did not focus on those in the gym, some of them really could lose their lives at any moment.

Kamijou looked around again.

The room was only dimly lit, but not just because the LED lights on the ceiling had no power. All of the outside windows were covered with impromptu barricades. They were not entirely sure that just piling up desks and chairs was enough to keep those Elements out if they made a serious attack, but it was better than nothing.

Kamijou borrowed one of the label-less plastic bottles the student council was carrying.

"How many liters of water do you need in a day again?"

"If the sports drink ads are to be believed, about 2-3 liters."

The glasses boy could only smile bitterly as he answered.

Kamijou shook his head and walked out into the hall.

All of the windows here were covered too and barricades blocked off the hallway here and there. Boys and girls from the same school were leaning against the walls and passing time amidst the great heat however they could. No one had any real ambition, so it looked like a scene from a field hospital.

However, the barricades were not perfect.

There were gaps in places and they allowed a view out, just like a castle's arrowslits.

The hallway bordering the courtyard gave a view of a concrete structure.

Normally, that would never see the light of day during winter.

"If only we could drink that pool water."

"Yes, but it's the green December water."

No water could be seen, but not because there was none there.

To keep as much as possible from evaporating, they had placed a large sheet over it. The thick sheet had come from the gym. It was normally used to keep the folding chair legs from damaging the floor during graduation.

"We've tried boiling it, running it through filters made from pebbles and gravel, and chemical sterilization using chlorine. It's mostly been the chemistry club doing the testing, but the risk of food poisoning remains far too high. It's because so many germs have all sorts of resistances these days. It's the downside of everyone using antibacterial sprays so much."

Still, that was plenty for anything other than potable water: for washing their bodies, for washing their clothes, or for the bathroom. They had reached a dead end, but they may have been blessed more than others since they "only" had to worry about potable water.

(I'm seriously worried about Misaka. But our phones don't work, so I have no way of contacting her.)

The thought came to him for no real reason. This went beyond not being able to eat something that had fallen on the floor. He had a feeling that a high-class girl would be more fragile than a commoner in situations like this.

A strange heat wave had settled in and Elements covered the ground.

The standard expectations of Academy City in December had crumbled away almost too easily.

The Jumpy Bunny fidgeted in her frilly pink swimsuit and spoke to him.

“U-um, Mie-chan and the others want to speak with you about what to do next, so if you can move, I’d like for you to stop by the student council room.”

“Understood.”

Kamijou was not the representative of his school, but to the glasses boy and Akikawa Mie, he would be the easiest one to speak with. (Although the real Jumpy Bunny would feel like she had barely even met Kamijou since Kihara Yuiitsu had taken her place before.) If they wanted to speak with him, it would have to be a fairly delicate issue.

Black Bikini Fukiyose stepped out of the infirmary.

“I’ll go too. He’s still in a dangerous state, so I can’t bear to see him walking on his own.”

“It’s not so bad I need to borrow your shoulder…”

But he felt this was not the time to press the issue.

As soon as he supported himself on her shoulder, a sweet aroma reached his nose. It was likely her hair or her sweat and it put an indescribable look on his face. Plus, this gave him plenty of shameless skin contact with the bikini girl. He did not want to raise his body temperature in this over 55 degree world, but there was nothing he could do. And if she noticed, she would probably mercilessly punish him with a fist despite his injury, so he did his best to restrain his body’s reaction.

Incidentally, a number of theories with little grounding in fact had spread among the girls who had an especially wide selection to choose from. Some said a swimsuit that covered more of the body would protect them from injuries and UV rays. Some said more fabric meant more that could be torn and that the smallest tear could spread like a run in a stocking and ruin the entire swimsuit. Some said that covering up too much skin, such as with a rash guard, would bring on heatstroke. But looking in from the outside, Kamijou had no way of knowing what had led Fukiyose to choose a bikini.

Meanwhile, he was not the only one noticing the sensitive gazes piercing them from all over the dark and gloomy hallway. Those eyes were gathering on their bottles of water more than Kamijou and Fukiyose themselves.

Just think of the situation here.

Kamijou’s school was only borrowing classrooms here, so to the original school’s students, they were an unnecessary drain on their resources.

When Kamijou entered the student council room with the help of the black bikini girl, he found Modern Middle School Girl Akikawa Mie who had (without even noticing) essentially taken over the student council in the name of helping the Jumpy Bunny. She was wearing a standard school swimsuit.

She looked at the glasses boy, the Jumpy Bunny, Kamijou, and Fukiyose (who was a new face for Akikawa). The glasses boy waved a hand to say it was okay to speak and Akikawa Mie nodded.

Yes, those were the only ones here.

Fukiyose had no way of knowing, but someone was missing.

Kamisato Kakeru.

The boy who had lost his right hand was no longer here.

“…”

The heat wave was melting the asphalt and the mysterious Elements had appeared. It had created enough of a panic that all the normal assumptions crumbled away. Without cellphones or the internet, they could not communicate with anyone. It was possible Kamisato was running around in this chaos and he may have ended up taking shelter in another school.

But…

What if that was not the case?

(Is this your doing too?)

Kamijou had no proof of that.

But it was true that boy had been best positioned to destroy some "sanctuaries".

Speculation may have been meaningless.

He needed to focus on overcoming the obstacle before his eyes.

And Modern Middle School Girl Akikawa Mie was most familiar with that hurdle since she was managing the shelter and all of its problems.

After gathering the people she could trust, she got right to the point.

"We don't have enough water."

"!! Do you have any idea how much danger we put ourselves in!? And now we're out of smokescreens and flash grenades for emergency evacuation!!"

"Fukiyose."

Kamijou called the name of the classmate lending him her shoulder as she shouted in anger.

"That's because I screwed up. It isn't her fault."

"Kh."

The student council was doing a lot of paperwork to preserve the peace of this small world known as a shelter. That was absolutely necessary, but a certain division had appeared between the students here.

The shelter contained students from two different schools (it was technically three since the original school was a middle and high school), so one school protected the building while the other went out to secure water. There was a simple reason for that and the decision had been made on the first day of the heat wave.

Kamijou's school had arrived later, so the original students could have found it unfair if the new students simply received the same resources as everyone else. To avoid any needless conflict as the shelter split in two, Kamijou's school had needed to prove their worth.

They had needed to venture into the dangerous "outside" and gather valuable water to become an indispensable cog in the machine.

But Fukiyose gave the student council members a look of blatant distrust.

"We're putting ourselves in danger to achieve 'equality'. If you think that's established a hierarchy and that we'll just do whatever you want, you've got this entire thing backwards. We've reported everything honestly. If we had wanted to, we could have consumed most of the water we found and insisted we'd only found a little bit."

"Of course."

Akikawa immediately nodded. She had no intention of objecting to that.

But at the same time…

"But if we're worn down little by little, there's a risk of that mistaken hierarchy setting into everyone's minds. …I thought simply gathering water would have enough of an impact, but I was too naïve. We need some greater impact to break free of this atmosphere. That's what I want to discuss."

"…"

“Fine. Fukiyose, let’s hear her out.”

At Kamijou’s prompting, Fukiyose pouted her lips but reluctantly relented. Due to his injury, the pointy-haired boy was the master key to their anger. If he criticized the student council, the others would join in. If he said it was okay, the others would have no reason to stand up in defiance.

“Sorry.”

Akikawa bowed in apology and spread a large piece of paper out on the table.

It seemed to be a diagram of the middle and high school.

“What’s this?”

“I don’t know how Academy City as a whole will settle this, but I think waiting is all we can do for now. Simply put, we can’t move from here. Now, what we need most is water. And I mean more than just gathering a few days’ worth when we need it. If we can get so much that we’re practically swimming in water, then, um, Kamijou-san, I think your school would be seen as heroes.”

The modern middle school girl’s index finger tapped a part of the diagram.

It was a rectangular area separated from the school building.

“The pool, hm?”

“It’s an outdoor pool in December, so it’s full of moss and bug carcasses. And all the resistant bacteria makes it a real gamble. But if we could drink this water, the situation would completely change.”

“But didn’t four-eyes say you’d tried a number of things, but you couldn’t get rid of those resistant bacteria and the risk of food poisoning remained?”

“Well, um, all of our attempts were pretty amateurish.”

Akikawa was quite blunt.

She may have been the type of person to completely change hobbies and to quit something without a second thought when it came to it.

She next spread out a map of District 7 as a whole.

“The district water department is located near this school on District 7’s southern end. It won’t be any use with the power out, but it might have some professional water purification equipment if we’re lucky. If we can find the culture medium for the tanks of organic microbes that consume bacteria… that is, a special sort of mud, it should make short work of everything, including those resistant bacteria.”

Kamijou and Fukiyose exchanged a glance at close range.

Akikawa pointed with her thumb at the thick stack of documents covered in labels that she had pulled from the library since the electronics had been rendered useless by the heat.

“The entire student council investigated it. We will of course run some tests with a test tube and microscope first, but it shouldn’t be a problem. Once the microbes eat the resistant bacteria, we can use chlorine, boiling, and a filter for good measure. Then we should be able to drink all the pool water.”

“Just mud? All you want us to bring is mud?”

“Yes. Of course, it will take quite a bit of it for the purification microbes to cover the entire fifty meter pool, so it should be similar to the previous water hunts. However,” warned Akikawa Mie. “This will of course require going outside. And while this will resolve our current water problems, it is also a surprise event meant to set your school up as heroes. We can’t help you until this is complete. Is that okay with you?”

Fukiyose did not wait even a second.

She spoke up while lending her shoulder to the pointy-haired boy who seriously may have had a hole in his gut.

“Give us a second to discuss this.”

"Of course."

With a confused "Hey?", Kamijou was dragged out of the student council room by Fukiyose.

The black-haired forehead girl crossed her arms and leaned against the door as if to seal the others inside the room.

"Is it possible they made up of convenient story to send us to our deaths and reduce the strain on their resources?"

"She isn't that shrewd. The thought might have occurred to her, but she wouldn't succumb to emotion and go through with it."

"Sorry, but I don't know their student council that well!"

"That's fine." Kamijou spread his arms and turned his palms toward Fukiyose. "Fukiyose, you stay behind on the next water hunt. We were always volunteering, so you don't have to go. Just don't raise your hand and that's that."

"Kamijou…?"

"I'm going. What other choice do I have? If this shelter splits apart, we'll be the ones that are driven out. They're a middle and high school, so they have us outnumbered two-to-one and we don't stand a chance when it comes to academics or powers development. If it comes to a serious conflict, the group of failed students will be wiped out in no time. And even if we managed to put up a fight, we would only trip each other up and doom us both. There's no way we can actually win."

"Have you forgotten your heart actually stopped!? Whatever we choose, you're the first one that needs to stay behind!!"

Perhaps.

But Kamijou shook his head.

“This is about more than just the school for me. It’s about Index, Othinus, and the calico cat too. Those freeloaders from my dorm are a drain on the resources here. I have to repay them for accepting those three.”

“…”

“So I can’t run away. It’s like a family issue. I brought this on myself, so you don’t need to worry about it, Fukiyose.”

“Ohhh!! Honestly!!”

His black bikini classmate scratched at her head and screamed.

And after a large sigh, she rudely jabbed her finger right in front of his nose.

“Fine, I’ll go with you just this once! It’s true nothing could be better than solving both our water problem and the power balance between schools all at once. But I still think this all sounds a little too convenient!!”

Kamijou honestly felt he had a good friend in her.

So he reached for the fingertip jabbing toward him and shook hands with the classmate who was always looking out for him.

When Fukiyose pouted her lips and stepped away from the door, the Jumpy Bunny peeked out.

“So wh-what will you be doing?”

“We’ll do it,” answered Kamijou. “But if it’s supposed to be a surprise, we’ll have to do it in secret. It’ll take some time to plan it out without your school finding out and to get started while hiding what we’re up to.”

Fukiyose cut in with a lower tone than when speaking to Kamijou. Her voice had softened somewhat, but she could not entirely rid herself of mistrust.

“We will also need to construct a route to the water department since we can’t exactly go for a carefree hike across the ground.”

“No one will go along with this if we can’t explain how this helps us. I’d like to know more about those microbes that girl was talking about. I’m basically going to be running an infomercial where people pay with their lives, so I’d like to memorize as much about the product as I can in the limited time available.”

“Half a day.” Fukiyose raised her index finger. “The preparations will take at least that long. That’s fine, right? We brought back enough water for at least today. And risked our lives doing so.”

“Y-yes.” The Jumpy Bunny nodded a few times while shrinking down like a turtle ducking into its shell. “Of course. Of course. Please do all the preparation you need. …We can’t leave here even if we wanted to, so we can’t help you. We can’t head out to rescue you either. If we did, it would ruin your heroic legend. So please tell us if you need anything ‘before that’. We’ll help in any way we can.”

“…”

Fukiyose seemed taken aback.

The other school could not leave here even if they wanted to.

If they gave a helping hand, it would establish the hierarchy between schools and apply decisive pressure to Kamijou’s school.

She may not have thought of that possibility until now.

With a light sigh, Kamijou placed a hand on the Jumpy Bunny’s head.

He thought this might be getting too friendly, but there was something he wanted to say.

“It’ll be okay. Don’t worry. We’ll end all this here. Once we can drink the pool water, we can get through this. After that, we just have to wait for the important people with their paintings on the wall to solve the fundamental problem. That’s why we have the…um, what were they called again? Y’know, that high-paid board of directors.”

"Yes, yes…"

The Jumpy Bunny nodded and watched Kamijou and Fukiyose walk away from the student council room.

After descending the stairs and moving out of view, Fukiyose's shoulders drooped in exhaustion.

"Do you think I was too hard on them? Maybe I've gotten a little too on edge."

"Ideally, you would tell them that."

"True enough," said his black-haired forehead classmate. "Kamijou, I'll draw out some routes to the water department on the map. I want a few different options in case we run into something unexpected. You look into the specs of the water purification microbes. …It would be best to lay the groundwork for gathering volunteers all at once instead of doing it bit by bit. Hit them with a ton of information at once and they won't be able to scrutinize it as carefully."

"We're going to be relying on each other out there, so I don't want to deceive them."

"You're the one that said this is like running an infomercial where people pay with their lives. Saying they'll only be accepting calls up to half an hour after the broadcast is pretty much the same thing. We need to hurry them along."

A single foolhardy individual could not gather all the mud they needed from the water department's purification tank. They would need a certain level of manpower for that.

And this was after Kamijou's heart had been stopped, so a mood of fear could set in if they spent too long debating this.

"This will end it all. No, we will end it. So we need to do whatever it takes."

"Right." Kamijou nodded and took a large step away from Fukiyose. "Half a day later means after midnight. We’ll be fighting the heat in the middle of the night.”

“The most important thing for you might be getting a nap to regain as much strength as you can.”

“Before that, I want to rid myself of some regrets. …That way I can focus on this final battle.”

Part 2

“Oh, it’s Touma!”

As she raised her voice in excitement, Index’s small body was contained in a white one piece swimsuit. She may have wanted to maintain some pride as a nun because she still wore her usual hood.

That said, she would have collapsed from the heat otherwise. Kamijou had not arrived in a stuffy room somewhere; he was in the direct sunlight of the school’s roof.

“Wait, why do you have bandages around your stomach!? Did you get hurt again!?”

“It’s nothing out of the ordinary. Don’t worry about it.”

He was lucky he could still stand on his own two feet and walk around. In this hell of over 55 degrees, that felt like a talent in and of itself.

“You don’t have to work out here, you know?”

The direct sunlight was their enemy, but it was also a protector.

It no longer mattered once they ran into an Element, but those things tended to like hiding in dark or cool places. So comparatively speaking, the sunlight was the lesser of two evils.

“But I guess there might not be any other empty space for you.”

The gym had become an emergency clinic filled with the people who had collapsed from heatstroke and the school’s classrooms were filled with supplies and the students themselves, so there was no space for working with anything relatively large.

The scorching concrete must have been too hot for her bare skin because

Index was sitting on one of the mattresses used for the vaulting box. Home carpentry tools were scattered around her. A few other small groups had formed and they were combating plywood and metal pipes.

It looked a lot like the preparations for the Daihaseisai or the Ichihanaransai, but they were constructing barricades to protect themselves from the Elements and the tightropes used to cross between buildings. The wire slides used wires as skinny as one's little finger, but by weaving in copper wire braids or pickpocket prevention wires, something handmade was good enough. An uneven thickness could create "lumps" which could bring them to a sudden stop between buildings, so they had to be careful.

The calico cat was stretched out on its back on the mattress. Its body looked unnaturally long. And even though that pet cat was always chasing her, palm sized Magic God Othinus was placing a folded handkerchief on the cat's forehead.

"Cursed cat beast, did you think everyone would spoil you if you lay there looking so cute? And this change from your usual excessive energy has me worried because I can't predict what you're going to do."

Despite her complaints, she did not stop looking after the cat.

And a distant look filled Kamijou's eyes.

"Why do you actually look *more* normal in a bikini, Othinus?"

"Because you are trying to judge a god by human standards."

Her arrogance did not seem to have changed. That said, it was a relief knowing she was her normal self even in this intense heat wave.

"By the way, what are you making, Index? That isn't like the other barricades."

"Yeah, I'm making what was asked of me!"

For some reason, Index puffed her chest out proudly while seated.

When Kamijou saw the beads of sweat on her neck dripping into her swimsuit, it filled him with a somewhat sinful feeling.

Oblivious, Index continued speaking.

“Heh heh. This is a secret weapon!! It’s a secret, so you’ll have to wait to learn what it is!”

“Really?”

“This will make your fight a lot easier, Touma.”

Index was battling with…something. It was made from several metal pipes and synthetic fiber fabric. It was not a parasol or a tent. He could not seem to figure out how it was used.

Then someone else walked over.

It was Black Bikini Fukiyose whose skin had a somewhat alluring shine. She had likely just put on some sunblock cream.

“Hm? So this is where you went?”

“Fukiyose, aren’t you supposed to be staring at that map?”

“I’m gathering the supplies we need.”

That was all she said.

She then looked down at Index fiddling with the mysterious secret weapon on the mattress.

“This girl couldn’t do anything at first, but she’s a quick learner. You just have to show her once and she memorizes the whole thing, so it doesn’t take much effort. It’s helped a lot with the construction work I need.”

Well, she does have a perfect memory, thought Kamijou.

It may have helped that Index was using old-fashioned wrenches and screwdrivers instead of power tools.

“I made the secret weapon!”

“Good girl, good girl.”

Fukiyose patted the silver-haired nun’s head.

Did that mean Fukiyose had drawn out the plans for this and it was not something Index had thought up?

Or was there no real rhyme or reason behind it?

The proud look on Index’s face suggested it had some meaning. At the very least, it was better than fighting the pressure of simply being in the way in these harsh circumstances.

Everyone wanted to be useful.

Everyone wanted a place where they belonged.

“…”

The mysterious Elements were wandering the surface during this unnatural heat wave.

Kamijou once more knew he had to protect this place even if he had no fundamental solution and even if they could only hole up here. This was no time for a conflict with the other people sheltering in the same school. To bring them all together, he had to overcome the biggest hurdle: water.

(This will end it.)

The two of them must have gotten along well because Index and Fukiyose were smiling as they chatted. The sight filled Kamijou with silent determination.

(We won’t need to worry about whether we belong here and we won’t have to fear being kicked out. We’ll have the leeway needed to accept everyone like normal. The only way to do that is to get to the water department and bring back that water purification microbe mud. Then we'll have a pool full of water.)

"What is it, Touma?"

"Nothing." He shook his head and intentionally smiled. "It's nothing."

Heading outside was scary. No one knew how long those handmade tightropes would last and he did not have it in him to face those giant, translucent, and mimic-loving Elements. But that fear was exactly why he had to do it. He had to improve the worsening situation as much as possible so they would not run out of strength before reaching the final moment.

While speaking with Index and Othinus, Black Bikini Fukiyose still seemed to suspect the latter was speaking through ventriloquism, but Kamijou felt some of the weight leave his stomach for the first time in a while.

The things he had to protect at all costs were not a burden.

Discovering that gave him great strength.

He parted ways with Index who still had work to do and he started back indoors.

Swimsuit Aogami Pierce (a sight no one had asked for) was staring off into the distance near the door.

"You just feel a need to protect them, don't you?"

"I know what you mean."

"Yeah, anyone our age would pick a fight with the world for some swimsuit girls."

"I was wrong to ever think I agreed with you."

Part 3

Kamijou asked a question of the classmate next to him.

“Hey, Aogami.”

“Yeah?”

It was evening and they were not inside the dimly-lit school building with its doors and windows sealed by makeshift barricades. They were near the faculty parking lot out back. The trash dump for the middle and high school was nearby and the incinerator that had caused so much trouble a few days before was still sliced in two.

The Elements with their translucent bodies and love of mimicry were a threat, but the boys had a simple reason for heading outside despite the danger.

“What do you think is the greatest luxury?”

“Sitting in this damn heat and casually eating the instant ramen we won. Heh. We sure are civilized for boiling our limited water to eat some hot food in this 55 degree weather. We’re the intellectual class.”

Simply put, they were cooking. With gas burners in the chemistry room and gas stovetops in the home ec room, the school did have special classrooms with heat sources. There would be even larger scale kitchen behind the cafeteria counter.

But none of that was usable. The electric ventilation fans were not running and using fire with all the windows and doors sealed introduced another problem.

Namely, carbon monoxide.

“You can’t survive just by fighting the Elements. Everyone’s doing their best to stay alive.”

Kamijou breathed a heavy sigh.

“Dammit. I’m feeling the joy of life from a five-pack clearance item. There aren’t any vegetables or even an egg. Why am I so easily swayed!?”

“At least you have an appetite. Lose that and you’ll be in the gym before long.”

The best areas were outside, but the students were generally limited to the elevated spaces like the rooftop and emergency staircase landings to avoid the Elements. Most of the students would use binoculars to check for Elements out the hallway windows. If they saw an opening, they would head out into the dangerous outdoors to cook and fill their stomachs. Of course, if there was any hint of danger, they had to drop everything and run back inside.

In addition to Kamijou and Aogami Pierce, other small groups of swimsuit boys and girls were working at cooking. Luckily, the Elements either had no hunger or had inhuman senses of taste and smell because the smell of cooking did not attract them.

Kamijou and Aogami were boiling water with the portable stove, the pot with a collapsible handle, and the other camping goods that Aogami had gathered, but the others had engineered their own methods. Some created three sides of a square with concrete blocks or bricks and threw a bunch of used chopsticks into the makeshift stove. Others had modified a metal handle in the engineering room and attached it to a portable stove’s gas can to heat the bottom of a pot with a burner-like flame.

Kamijou poked at their pot with a fork and spoke to a familiar boy working nearby.

“What are you doing, four-eyes? Checking for a satellite broadcast?”

“Seriously!? We might get the late-night anime infrastructure back up!? In that case, I’ve got to survive this post-apocalypse!!”

The student council boy who was always helping the Jumpy Bunny looked unsure how to respond to Aogami's excitement as he pointed an upside down umbrella toward the sun. The inside of the umbrella was covered in aluminum foil, so it looked like a parabolic antenna.

"No. With this heat, I was thinking I could gather the sunlight to make a solar cooker."

"Oh?"

"Tch. So my shut-in life will have to wait… Well, anyway, that sounds nice. Leave it to the student council intellectual. You might even find a way to generate some electricity. Oh, if we could only fix the equipment in the AV room, I bet we could get it to play optical discs!"

"What have you been carrying around in all this confusion, Aogami? Are you like the guy who goes out of his way to wear weights in the martial arts tournament to determine the ruler of the world?"

Since almost all electronics had been ruined by the heat, electricity alone would not help much. Water quality aside, they needed to transform precious water into steam if they wanted to turn a turbine. …They knew that, but electricity was the symbol of civilization to them. Nothing else could provide greater psychological support.

But the glasses boy shrugged in his speedo (that no one wanted to see).

"Well, it would be nice if was that easy. As you can see, I haven't had much luck. The calculations say I should be gathering the light, though…"

"Maybe it's just the limits of a quick and dirty handmade device."

"So what do you have in the pot attached to the handle?"

"Prepackaged curry. It's easier than cooking vegetables from scratch and you can heat the sealed package in dirty water and then eat it just fine."

"Dammit, I'll help! Just hand over some of that curry when it's cooked. We can make curry ramen with our camp pot!!"

"Hah hah. You're not worth that, so no thank you."

"But curry? Won't that just make you want water?"

"I can eat the medium spicy kind without any water."

"Huh? Four-eyes, so you like spicy foods?"

"No, I just like to focus on the flavor of the food while I'm eating it. It doesn't matter as much with soup or stew, but I don't like to dilute it or mix it together with water or tea. You could say I like to drink my drinks as drinks."

Even if they were not promised a share, Kamijou and Aogami Pierce still began helping with Prototype Solar Cooker Mk. 1. They never met any success, but working with their hands helped free them from the pressure bearing down on them.

"Four-eyes, cooking the curry is good and all, but what about rice? Washing and cooking the rice uses a lot of water, doesn't it?"

"Yes, that's why I'll be eating it with bread."

"I see. Western curry, huh?"

"Don't look so smug when you're wrong, Aogami Pierce. Western curry uses rice too."

They chatted as they worked, but there was no sign of any improvement. The angle of the umbrella's frame may have been poor for gathering light or the surface area may have been inadequate. They would have to research those issues if they hoped to continue.

"You look happy for failing so much, four-eyes."

"I'm glad I could work for myself to find what I need to do. Then again, this might be a lot like finding a manga while cleaning your room and reading that instead of cleaning.”

“I get it, but what about the curry?”

“Could I perhaps borrow your camp equipment?”

“Curry ramen then?”

The negotiations were complete.

The glasses boy gained some hot curry and the other two had a new topping.

“Oh, man. These chopped carrots and potatoes are incredible. Ah! I’m being moved to emotion by carrots, a constant presence in the top three worst vegetables!! Hey, Kami-yan, were meat-loving high school boys really this health-conscious?”

“Carrots are an indispensable part of fried rice and white stew, aren’t they!? Besides, Kamijou-san is a well-balanced modern man who loves tofu and seaweed!! …Come to think of it, when did we get so good at this?”

“At what?”

“At negotiations or bargaining or whatever. I feel like we’ve gotten stronger or bolder or something.”

“The one with the best survival skills is you, Kami-yan. You’re eating and you didn’t prepare any tools or food.”

“Uuh…”

“Well, grade schoolers are being taught about the economy and the stock market these days, so I don’t think it’s a bad thing.”

They greedily devoured their various feasts.

They dumped their share of the prepackaged curry on the noodles boiled in the camping stove and single-person pot. Then Kamijou and Aogami Pierce began sticking their forks in to eat. The remaining soup went to Aogami since the cooking equipment was his. The sight would have made a qualified nutritionist scream.

After parting ways with Aogami Pierce and the glasses boy, Kamijou returned to the barricaded school building.

It was evening, but no one was naïve enough to expect the temperature to drop. The hellish heat would continue even after the sunset. And the waiting seemed to last forever in that scorching hell. It would roast their nerves like plastic expanding in the heat. The 55 degree heat wave had wiped out all the machines, so it was hard to find a functioning clock and that may have helped mess with their sense of time. That may have been why the principal and vice principal had gathered a lot of attention for their old-fashioned hand-wound wristwatches.

(If I borrowed one of those watches, I bet I could make a sundial.)

But Kamijou felt he was better off than the others.

At the very least, the end was in sight for him. He had a goal.

That was the water department and the purification microbes.

That alone meant a lot. Anyone's mind would raise the white flag if they had to suffer through the never-ending heat while everything seemed stuck in an infinite loop.

And as he thought about that, someone called out to him.

"Hey."

"?"

A boy was slumped against the dim hallway's wall like a corpse. Thanks to that, Kamijou had entirely overlooked his presence. And he did not recognize the boy.

The boy had several plastic bottles lined up on the floor. They were the stereotypical 500mL size. If they were behind a glass door in a convenience store, they would have been full of ice cold soda.

But there was no sign of that here.

The labels had been removed and they were full of dried sand presumably dug up from a sandbox.

“Need a water filter? With one of these, you can turn even the muddiest water into pure drinking water. I’m willing to part with one for just a bottle’s worth of water. You hear that? Just one. One bottle’s worth and you can get as much water as you want. A good deal, don’t you think?”

Kamijou ignored him. This was just like a questionable infopreneur advertisement claiming their half hour class could teach you the investment techniques needed to become a millionaire. If they actually had those techniques, they would not need to sell them to others. They could just use the techniques themselves. That meant they were making their money some other way.

Those things were almost always fake.

A bunch of plastic sheets were fluttering in the scorching wind while hanging up in the front schoolyard like drying laundry. By laying those out over the ground, the moisture evaporated from the dirt would supposedly gather on them as drops of water. However, the schoolyard was already dried and cracked. No one knew who owned those anymore, but someone had definitely traded a water bottle for one and then cried over being deceived.

(I just hope Misaka wasn’t tricked too…)

Just as he thought that, a few boys descended the stairs.

Their build was about the same as Kamijou’s, but they were probably from the other school. Almost all the boys wore blue swim trunks, but the designs were subtly different.

The boys were laughing as they spoke to each other.

"Anyway, I heard him out since he had three bottles of water, but what do you think he wanted? My swimsuit. He wanted me to sell it to him."

"What the hell!? Why would you want a guy's swimsuit!? And a used one too!!"

"Don't get caught up in the details. And does that mean you'd buy a girl's swimsuit?"

"I didn't say that!"

"Realistically though, you think he wanted to pretend to be from our school? I mean, their school is in a pretty sad state."

Kamijou passed by the laughing boys. And one of them blatantly bumped into his shoulder in the process.

"…Sigh."

Was this a post-apocalyptic world?

And this was just a "trial run". Did they think this commotion would last for a decade or a century? Did they not realize that their lack of restraint during the emergency would only get them beat up the second standard law and order returned?

(What am I supposed to do until nightfall? I feel like I'm trapped in a locker that's being cooked from the outside and it's going to drive me insane. Maybe I should look for something I can help with like Index is doing.)

That had to be why violence was not running rampant even though the environment could hardly be worse. People's hearts would succumb to the pressure if they did not focus on some productive and hands-on work. It was unclear whether all of the students heading out on the dangerous water hunts were really doing so for the efficiency and logic of needing water.

Kamijou recalled the glasses boy who had enjoyed fiddling with the solar cooker that may or may not have actually been useful.

(So should I head to the Jumpy Bunny's student council, or…)

As he was wandering around in thought, he saw someone moving around in an empty classroom with barricaded windows.

It was…

"Kumokawa-senpai?"

That free spirit was an upperclassman at Kamijou's school, but it was a little unclear when she actually went to class. She had shoulder-length black hair with the bangs held up by a headband. The mature girl(?) never forgot to have a daring smile on her face. He could not imagine what kind of life she lived. To a high school boy like him, she seemed to live in an entirely different world, just like college girls or female teachers.

"Oh," said the busty upperclassman when she noticed him.

However…

For some reason, she was wearing a work apron and nothing else.

"……Hm? Hmmmm!?"

At first, Kamijou did not know how to react.

He considered the possibility that he was hallucinating after succumbing to heatstroke.

"Hey, what's with that wide-eyed look? Is it that weird to see me in something other than my uniform?"

"Oh, no. the hallucination is talking to me now. No, wait. This is no hallucination! But that means she's wearing a naked apron at school!! That's pretty dangerous in an entirely different way!!"

"What, are you feeling sexually frustrated? Well, I guess I can't blame you in this situation."

With an exasperated sigh, Kumokawa Seria turned a bit to the side.

That revealed the truth.

She was wearing the apron over a girl's swimsuit just like Fukiyose and the others. She just looked naked when viewed from straight ahead.

Kumokawa also held something odd for someone in a swimsuit or someone in an apron.

It was a hand pump used to pump kerosene from a plastic tank. The sight only filled his mind with pointless trivia like the fact that the original inventor had developed it to transfer soy sauce instead of kerosene. His memories were acting oddly and he worried that he was getting a little heatstroke.

"You want to know what this is for?"

"Yes. What are you doing, Senpai?"

Kumokawa waved the hand pump to beckon him into the empty classroom. After he tilted his head and shut the sliding door behind him, she used the pump to point to a corner of the classroom.

"What do you think that is?"

"Um, a heater?"

"Yes, but not the usual kind." Kumokawa grinned in her pseudo naked apron that was actually a swimsuit apron. "It's a hot water heating system. It boils water, sends it through the pipes running between classrooms, and uses the heat to warm the air."

"Hot water…"

Kamijou repeated the words as if pondering the sound.

"Ah!?"

"So you've caught on. Yes, there's water inside here. The device is useless with the power out, so it isn't even boiling."

Kumokawa had removed the lid at the top of the boxy device. She stuck the hand pump inside and began sucking out the clear liquid. She filled a two liter bottle in no time at all.

"W-wow… There's so much of it!"

"It's pretty iffy whether we can drink it, though. Since it's for heating, it'll be left in the tank for months on end. They might refill it to replace what evaporated, but that's just little by little. They don't actually replace it all. … That means it could be full of germs. In fact, I'd be amazed if it wasn't completely rotten." Kumokawa laughed. "But water has its uses even if you can't drink it. Kamijou Boy, *Little Miss Hardheaded* in your class might not think of it, but an obvious reward is more important than a justification if you want to invite people to possible death. If they know they can get a nice shower before heading out, you're sure to get more volunteers. Especially from the girls."

"C-can we really get that much…?"

Kamijou was skeptical. Or rather, he was putting up his defenses to protect himself from the disappointment if it did not work. Kumokawa's response was to casually grab one of the two liter bottles from the floor. At four times the size of a 500mL bottle, that rare item was valuable enough to trade for mint body gel or a sun-blocking tent.

And she dumped it over her head without a second thought.

She did so as boldly as baseball or soccer players celebrating a victory.

The clear liquid splashed and dripped down the sexy upperclassman's hair, face, apron, swimsuit, thighs, and legs.

She shook her head like a large dog after a bath.

“Well, you get the picture. And I’m allowed a reward too since I was the one that actually found and retrieved the water, right?”

“S-Senpai…”

Kamijou gulped as he watched that waste of water.

No…

“It’s gotten all see-through. O-oh, no. That’s really lewd, Senpai!!”

“Hm?”

Kumokawa looked confused and glanced down at her own chest.

The work apron had soaked up the water and grown see-through, so the colors beneath were showing through. But…

“Yeah, but I’m wearing a swimsuit underneath.”

“I know that! I do, but this feels like an extra bonus. It’s different from just seeing the swimsuit! W-wait a second, Senpai! Give me a second to analyze why I find this so hot! I want to categorize it properly!!”

Kamijou Touma, the pointy-haired truth-seeker, entered a zone of intense focus rivalling a professional shogi player and dove into a trance so deep he thought he could see the ends of the universe. A distant look entered Kumokawa Seria’s eyes as she stood in front of him.

She must have been a little bothered by the moisture inside her swimsuit because she reached down to her butt and fixed the swimsuit.

“Hmm. Boys are still quite the mystery.”

“That’s lewd too, Senpai!! But all you were doing was casually fixing your swimsuit!?”

“What, is everything lewd to you?”

“Oh, I get it. It isn’t the actual phenomena or actions before my eyes! Maybe it’s you yourself that’s lewd!!”

Kamijou opened his eyes with such force that one could almost hear a weird sound effect.

That was what led Kumokawa to raise the light hand pump in preparation to attack.

Part 4

It was two in the morning.

The hellish heat wave showed no sign of fading even after sunset.

The heat of a fierce summer night filled the air evenly.

The school had several buildings and Kamijou’s group of water hunters were gathered on the middle school rooftop because it was closest to the outer fence.

A metal wire as thick as their little fingers had been tossed over the railing and it was diagonally connected to the roof of the multi-tenant building outside the fence. The kind of thick S-shaped hook used to hang large equipment in a garage had been bent slightly to grasp the small wheel of a roller skate or a skateboard to create a pulley. This “tightrope” would take them straight to the other side. Their route back stretched from the multi-tenant building’s roof to a window in the middle school building.

They were about to leave on their mission.

Once outside, falling to the surface would mean instant death or a slow, painful death. However, the more elevated routes were still far from safe.

Kamijou, Fukiyose, Aogami Pierce, and other girls and boys wearing swimsuits, gloves, and scarves were gathered with a single middle school girl from another school entirely.

It was Akikawa Mie.

She too wore a swimsuit, but she lacked the gloves and scarf meant for touching heated metal. In a way, she was unequipped and defenseless. She gave a deep bow to Kamijou and the others.

“Thank you. We’re counting on you here.”

“Sure thing. This water is a pretty urgent matter for us too.”

Kamijou and the others waved without looking back and then jumped out into the dark sky.

They first slid down the tightrope to reach the neighboring multi-tenant building. They then moved to another tightrope that took them to the emergency staircase partway up the wall of another building. For light, they had wrapped bandages around the ends of bats and sprinkled on ethanol disinfectant for primitive torches. They were afraid to produce their own light with countless Elements lurking around them and they thought they would burn their own hands while holding the torch and S-shaped pulley at the same time, but they could easily fall to their deaths if they tried to navigate these dark elevated places while blind.

The power was out and the LED lights were dead, so the city was frighteningly dark.

They felt like the world was covered in thick ink, but they saw similar flickering light sources in the distance.

With torch in hand, Kamijou set foot on the emergency staircase landing and finally had it in him to focus on his surroundings.

“What is that? Students from another school?”

He briefly thought of a high-class Tokiwadai Middle School girl. He was pretty sure she lived in District 7 too.

But Fukiyose was more skeptical.

“I’m not so sure. At this distance, those have to be more like flamethrowers than torches. The height is odd too. That’s probably fire being blasted up from the ground.”

In other words, those were Fire Elements.

They had not done any detailed research on those lifeforms(?), but they seemed to like mimicry. That meant they did not normally draw attention to themselves. If they were spraying fire like that, then they may have been in battle.

But with what?

Were the Elements fighting each other or were they attacking humans?

“This is no time to go find out.”

“But…”

“There might be Elements that lure people out like this. If they use mimicry, it means they’re smart enough to take advantage how we’ll react to what we see.”

“So you’re saying those are like footballfish that use light to lure in their prey?”

“It would be one thing if this was right after the heat wave started, but we’re 72 hours in now. How stupid would someone have to be to directly take on the Elements at this point?”

Now that she mentioned it, that did seem odd.

It was the standard answer, but perhaps it was strange to find the standard in such nonstandard circumstances.

Also, the Elements preferred dark and cool places.

That meant they were generally nocturnal. Unless they had a definite goal worth exposing themselves to such a threat, no one would set foot on the surface at night. The boiling heat remained even without direct sunlight, so nothing was gained by heading out at this time.

Not to mention that Kamijou’s group could not take a direct route to reach whoever or whatever this was. They would have to use the roundabout route supplied by the irregularly placed tightropes and there might not even be a tightrope leading there.

“Anyway, Fukiyose, what happened to that ladder? Y’know, the one to cross between buildings.”

“We don’t need it this time. We’re using this instead.”

Fukiyose indicated the long object on her back. It was wrapped in a synthetic fiber material instead of showing exposed metal.

(Is that the thing Index was working on during the day?)

“You’ll see soon enough.”

“?”

Kamijou looked confused and he carried one of the spare water dispenser bottles they had acquired before. It was the size of a large daruma doll. It was light now, but it would be a hellish burden on the back once it was full of mud.

After climbing to the top of the emergency stairs on the outside wall, they were on a roof twice the height of the previous one. From there, they passed over a few more buildings.

Kamijou had no idea where the water department was since he never had to think about it, but according to Fukiyose, who had planned their route, it was not far away.

“It’s only about five hundred meters as the crow flies.”

“As the crow flies, huh?”

The tightropes were set up where they were convenient at the time, so there was no overall plan. The only unwritten rule was that no tightrope was removed once it had been set up. It was possible they would have to circle around and around in a gradually approaching spiral.

Kamijou prepared himself for that possibility as they continued on.

But even that was too naïve.

“…Wait.”

They all came to a stop.

Aogami Pierce spoke up in a scratchy voice without even touching the metal railing.

“As the crow flies or not, there’re no tightropes leading to the water department at all!”

He was exactly right.

They had makeshift torches made by wrapping bandages around bats and soaking them in alcohol and they had makeshift reflectors made by placing aluminum foil on the inside of plastic umbrellas, but they could not find any wires even after focusing the torchlight here and there.

The water department was a fenced-in flat concrete building and a smooth rectangular high-rise building that likely contained several septic tanks stacked vertically. From the rooftop, they could see no tightropes leading there. And not just from this building. They saw nothing from any direction.

It was more than fifty meters away.

With too much of a height difference, they would pick up too much speed on the wire slides.

That meant height was another factor they had to take into consideration, but that did not matter now.

“Wait. We didn’t bring anything to build a tightrope or even the ladder that can only take us a fifth of that distance. There’s nothing we can do but sit here and stare at the gap!”

“Don’t be so sure.”

In the hellishly hot night, Fukiyose lowered the object on her shoulders to the concrete. She had been carrying this in place of the usual ladder. It was the secret weapon that Index had helped her build.

The collection of metal pipes and synthetic fiber fabric was not shaped like a parasol or a tent.

Fukiyose bent the joints in the metal pipes, spread out the cloth, and fixed a few latches in place with her fingers. This created a silhouette much like a two meter wide stingray.

Now that he finally recognized it, Kamijou groaned the answer.

“A hang glider…”

If they could glide through the night sky, the absence of tightropes would no longer matter.

“But are you insane? The real ones aren’t that small. Don’t the wings have to be really large to keep a single person afloat!?”

“Again, don’t be so sure.”

Fukiyose seemed to have already taken that into account.

She used the back of her glove to wipe the sweat from her brow.

“It’s true you need pretty big wings to get enough lift in normal circumstances, but the air temperature alone is 55 degrees right now. The heat in the asphalt has to be even worse. …And that heated air will rise. Would you understand if I said the entire city is covered in gentle updrafts?”

“Oh.”

“We just have to borrow the power that’s already there. And that means we can shrink this down to a portable size.”

The intense heat wave was more than just a nuisance.

They could use that greatest obstacle to continue forward.

Even ignoring the specific method of ignoring the terrain as they flew through the sky, the way of thinking alone seemed like a huge breakthrough. It was like the light of an exit found after wandering through a cave after being buried alive.

Then Fukiyose sighed.

“We couldn’t make enough for everyone, so we’ll have to ride them two at a time. Sorry if that leaves anyone out, but you can stand watch here. So I may not like it, but let’s go, Kamijou!!”

“Eh? Wait! Wah!?”

As the other girls spread out similar hang gliders, swimsuit Fukiyose grabbed the horizontal metal bar and began to run, as if to show how it was done. This was too much for Kamijou who was forced along with her. He tossed the bat and bandage torch aside, grabbed the bar, and moved his legs so he would not be dragged along. The metal railing on the edge of the roof was right in front of them.

Before reaching it, his body floated up.

The soles of his shoes softly stroked the railing and his mind went blank with the same strange floating sensation as when riding a roller coaster.

“We’re flying!? We’re really flying!?”

“We’ve caught the updraft more than the wind. If my calculations are correct, we can continue flying indefinitely.”

If so, that was amazing.

They had been so restricted by the terrain and the Elements, but this would allow them to travel so much further. In fact, it was possible they could even escape outside Academy City.

But as he thought about that, a question occurred to Kamijou.

“Huh? Then why did we bother using the tightropes like normal to get this far? We could have flown straight from the school rooftop.”

Instead of just gliding downward, they could actually ascend like this, so they should have been able to do anything.

But as Fukiyose sweated in her black bikini next to him, he had a feeling not all of that sweat came from the heat. In fact, she was clearly doing her best not to look him in the eye.

Then she made a confession in a nearly inaudible whisper.

“(With the constant updrafts everywhere, we can go up, but we don’t really have a way of going down…)”

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

“D-don’t shake it, Kamijou! We’ll lose our balance!!”

“But, that means, but!? So this was like tying a giant balloon to our waists and floating up into the sky!? Not even the pre-Wright Brothers inventors were this bad! Why would you drag me along on a flight with a 100% chance of crashing!?”

“I didn’t give it *that* little…thought!!”

He heard a metallic sound behind him.

By the time he realized Fukiyose had kicked something with her heel, he heard the sound of a fishing reel rapidly unwinding.

He looked down and saw a metal wire as thick as his little finger. Dangling from that was the kind of J-shaped metal hook used on the ends of cranes.

It hit the asphalt, dragged along the ground, and scattered orange sparks in the darkness a few times. Suddenly, the glider was tugged to a stop.

“Gwah!?”

“Don’t let go, Kamijou! That was just the brake catching!!”

They had been sewn to the spot when the hook had caught on a buffer stop or a guardrail on the surface. Using Kamijou’s balloon analogy, this was like a string tied to a tree branch.

“Wait a minute… Then this is more like being tied to a giant kite than riding an airplane! Isn’t that more from the world of comedy than from historical dramas!?”

“If we survive this, we can submit our names for a world record. And this will hardly be a comedy if we kept going and then fell.”

In other words, they could keep flying indefinitely, but if they went any further than this, they could no longer descend safely. Once the glider passed the wire’s height, they could no longer use the brake. Afraid of the inevitable fall to their deaths, they would be forced to continue rising with the glider.

“But what do we do now?”

Even if they would not rise any further, they still had no way of getting to the ground either.

As he tried to figure out a plan, Fukiyose flicked the latches on the metal bars. She was allowing the joints to move once more.

In other words, she was folding up the wings.

Once the area shrank, the amount of buoyancy and lift would also shrink.

This was far from the stable descent of an airplane or helicopter. It was more like a gentle stall or emergency landing that could not be stopped once it started.

“Oh, ohhhh, ohhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

“Enough with the weird voices! If I mess this up, we won’t be able to control the fall!!”

“Surely you understand the human heart enough to know that’s what’s so scary! Oooooaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhh!?”

They did not have a pretty landing.

They nearly fell onto their sides but managed to keep their balance as they set their feet down on the water department’s flat roof. They had descended in a small arc around the hook, so they had not lost their speed. If they had tripped, they would have been wiped like a rag along the concrete roof. After being tossed around, they managed to get rid of their speed by crashing through a clothes-drying rack likely used by the workers.

Kamijou collapsed on the spot despite the floor feeling like a scorching stone after all the heat it had absorbed.

He had not fallen onto his back, so the container for the mud was safe.

“I feel like the value of my life has gone way down recently.”

“That’s better than losing it, right?”

As she spoke, Fukiyose pulled a cheap lighter from her black bikini’s cleavage. She had likely borrowed it from the faculty room. Similarly, she bent her index finger like a hook, reached into the hipline of her bikini bottom, and pulled out a rag the size of a handkerchief.

“Y-y’know…”

“What choice do I have? Swimsuits don’t come with pockets.”

She may have been trying to stay calm, but her face grew red.

The bikini girl crouched down on the spot, used the lighter she had swallowed her embarrassment to bring along, and used the flame as a landmark and a signal.

A successful run gave everyone else more momentum.

More and more stingray-like hang gliders flew from the opposite building.

Fukiyose grabbed a long pole from the clothes-drying platform they had crashed through and tossed it to Kamijou.

“Just in case a hook doesn’t catch on the ground, poke at it or otherwise get it to catch something on the roof!!”

“You’re kidding, right? I’ll be killed if one of those heavy hooks hits me in the head!”

“I’m more worried about someone dropping the wire too early and crashing into the ground.”

He could not stop the squeezing at his heart from this unpracticed challenge, but none of his classmates’ flights ended in disaster. Some of them tripped on the roof, were dragged along the roof, or had their water dispenser tanks or water bottles burst or break, but they all managed to reach the water department.

“We’ll have to do this at least once more on the way back, won’t we? And it will be even harder to balance with the water purification microbe mud on our backs.”

“Oh, no. I’ll have to numb my heart by focusing on the dream of the swimsuit girl next to me feeling her heart pounding thanks to the suspension bridge effect or something.”

Faced with the difference between the modern strong-willed girls and that more moe vision, Kamijou reflexively silenced Aogami Pierce with a smack to the head.

The water department’s rooftop door was locked, but they managed by working together. When Kamijou and four or five other boys kicked in unison, the door bent and the metal lock burst off.

It was dark inside the door and some cool air drifted out.

Living in a world of 55 degrees may have thrown off their senses. It may have still been above 40 degrees in the digital world and it may have been hotter than a bath.

But Kamijou felt a shiver run through his entire body.

It was a shiver of protest over this unexpected luxury suddenly arriving with no warning.

“What is this? What’s going on?”

“Whether we can drink it or not, there might still be some water in here. Maybe the evaporation heat is lowering the temperature?”

They combined first aid bandages and ethanol with the clothes-drying poles to create torches. It may have been to divide up who was carrying what, but the girls kept pulling all the supplies from their swimsuits and Kamijou was unsure how to react.

As they walked through the water department with their makeshift lights, they found the hallway floor was unnaturally damp.

“Oh, the heat must have taken out the more easily melted parts of the sprinklers. What a waste…”

Since they had been traveling from building to building, they had pretty quickly thought to check the water storage tanks on the roofs, but the tanks had all been empty due to malfunctioning sprinkler systems. The systems were there to prevent the buildings from burning down, so they were not made to preserve water.

Kamijou felt dizzied by the price of that luxury.

“Instead of lamenting this lost bonus prize, let’s get to the water purification microbes. If those water tanks are also empty and the mud is dry and cracked, we’re in real trouble.”

The water department had two buildings: a flat one and a tall one. The microbes would be in the purification building with tanks stacked vertically. Kamijou and the others followed the passageway in that direction.

On the way, the temperature continued lowering.

For an instant, Kamijou had a vision of everything dumped on the ground and their plan ruined.

But that was not the case.

“Ohh…”

Aogami Pierce could not help but react out loud.

There were no internal walls dividing up the floor. A large square hole took up the entire area of the building. It was more than five meters deep and forty meters long and wide. It looked like a pool with the water removed, but there were still some puddles at the bottom.

And the uneven distribution of puddles was proof that it was not flat concrete at the bottom.

There was a layer of brown mud there.

If the information Akikawa Mie and the others had gathered was accurate, that was the culture medium for the water purification microbes.

“We’re saved… It’s really there!” rejoiced Aogami Pierce. “If we scoop up the mud from those wet parts, an entire pool full of water is ours! We might really make it!!”

They checked around tank and found a metal ladder for maintenance along the wall. They touched it and found it was almost painfully cool. It reminded them of an ice-cold glass of soda.

It was time for the boys to get to work.

They climbed down the ladder with their water dispenser tanks, water bottles, gas cans, and any other empty container they had found. Their feet sank ankle-deep even in the parts that had looked dry. That meant the mud was still “alive”. Filled with joy, they began scooping the mud into the containers with both hands.

“Ha ha.”

The more they filled the containers, the harder it would be climb back up the ladder.

But they forgot all about that and Kamijou found he was laughing.

“Ah ha ha ha ha ha!! Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!”

His throat was dry and every drop of sweat was a waste, but he forgot all about that and even let tears well up in his eyes. Now that they had made it this far, they would be all right. They had won the bet. That incredible sense of relief washed over his body. Not even a high-class Tokiwadai Middle School girl given the VIP treatment at a casino on an overseas trip would feel this excited. They had risked their lives and would return with what it took to save so many others’ lives. Only the commoners like them could make such a large gamble without thinking about the risks. Some of his classmates collapsed onto their sides in the mud. Some rolled onto their backs and laughed like idiots despite the containers of mud on their backs. The cool sensation of the mud must have felt nice.

“We’re saved…”

With the weight of the water dispenser bottle on his back, Kamijou forced down his endless urge to laugh.

The mud was heavier than water.

It was heavier than a girl.

But it did not feel like a burden. He was carrying “salvation” on his back.

“We can survive now. We can protect our school! Everything’s finally going to get better!! We’ve switched over to a new set of rails!!”

Kamijou dragged his muddy body over, grabbed the ladder with his slippery hands, and clenched his teeth as he climbed. With each rung, he felt joy grow in his heart until he thought his chest would burst. He felt like he had grabbed the spider’s thread dangling down into hell. When he passed the final rung and threw himself safely onto the floor, it almost seemed too easy.

Black Bikini Fukiyose crouched down to get closer to him and spoke.

“Good job, Kamijou. Maybe we should have found a rope and pulled the containers up. Like a game of tug-of-war.”

“Don’t be ridiculous… That’s like adding an elevator to the top of Everest. You’ll understand if you do it yourself. Don’t take away the joy of living.”

The way Kamijou laughed may have seemed creepy under normal circumstances, but Fukiyose narrowed her eyes and smiled back.

Aogami Pierce and the other boys climbed the ladder one by one, looking like muddy zombies. They were all exhausted, but they were grinning like idiots. They looked like had just climbed a great mountain.

“Let’s get back… Let’s return everything to normal.”

“It makes me sick just to think about heading back out into that heat. It might be best to get going before we get any more accustomed to this.”

As they discussed what to do, Kamijou and the others started toward the passageway to the other building.

The water department was no further use to them. The only challenge left was the gliders. They had no idea if they could maintain their balance with the heavy mud on their backs, but as long as they could do that, they just had to slide down the wires back to school.

Or so they thought.

However, something had slipped their minds thanks to their comfortable exhaustion and sense of accomplishment.

The Elements preferred dark and cool places.

That was why the people were so very cornered during the heat wave and why their hiding places were so very limited.

The flames flickered on the ends of the clothes-drying poles.

No, the scene beyond the flames was shimmering.

“Oh, no! It’s an Eleme-…!!”

Before Kamijou could finish yelling, a giant form appeared within five meters of his pointy-haired head. It blocked their way down the passageway.

The bizarre bug had eight legs, several eyes, and clicking mouthparts. It was modeled after a maneki-gumo, a spider that excelled at mimicry.

At Class 2, the monster was six meters long.

A yellow will-o’-the-wisp could vaguely be seen in the center.

(Yellow!? This isn’t the Fire we usually see! It’s a rare Wind core!!)

A moment later, it fired something other than strange venom or web.

It was more like a solid wall than a gust of wind.

Holding the clothes-drying pole torch in both hands proved a mistake. He stabbed the monster in the eye with the fiery pole instead of his right hand, but it was not enough.

It only slightly diverted the path of the attack.

He and around ten other boys and girls were struck by the raging wind. Once he noticed his feet lifting from the floor, it was all over. They were thrown to the side, the glass surrounding the passageway shattered, and they were literally tossed into the empty air.

“Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

They were only two stories up.

The soft mud-packed container on his back may have helped too.

But when he heard the squishing sound and felt the blow soften, he knew the water dispenser tank had burst. His vision grew dark because that was more precious than his own life.

Meanwhile, the maneki-gumo was still on the passageway.

They could not finish off an Element without Imagine Breaker. If the classmates with usable mud were taken out, the school’s pool would remain useless to them. Would the people there wither away or would they drink the dangerous water and grow weak from food poisoning? He had to bring a third option to the table.

He slowly got up amid the sticky mud and grabbed the clothes-drying pole that was still burning thanks to the ethanol.

He threw it like a javelin toward the broken passageway.

It did not do any real damage, but it did direct the maneki-gumo’s attention his way.

Kamijou ignored it and yelled up into the building.

“Go on ahead!! We can’t escape this dead-end without getting that mud back to the school!!”

“Kami-yan!?”

Aogami Pierce shouted back down at him, so Kamijou sighed in relief that the boy was safe.

Then the six meter spider jumped down to the ground.

“…!!!???”

Kamijou somehow managed to roll out of the way despite how much muddier it made him. Without even using any claws or fangs, the spider’s weight alone sent thick cracks running through the asphalt.

“…Gh…”

Meanwhile, Black Bikini Fukiyose Seiri groaned from the ground.

Without a mud container to cushion the impact, the fall may have been harder on her.

“What are we going to do, Kamijou…?”

During the day, Kamijou had faced an Element and been hit by a painful surprise attack, so he wanted to avoid facing one directly. He wanted to drive it off and escape to higher ground.

“You still have that infinite glider, right? We need to head for a rooftop and get into the air.”

Fukiyose had not recovered from the fall yet, so he supported her as he made his suggestion.

Meanwhile, something else walked along the surface.

It was an octopus with eight tentacles and a giant head. Since they liked mimicry, it may have been a common octopus. And there was a blue will-o’-the-wisp glowing in the center of its round and inflated head.

At Class 3, it was twelve meters tall.

The top of its head rose higher than the passageway above.

(That’s a Water-…)

He did not have time to finish his thought.

Ultra-high pressure water shot out like a laser beam and mercilessly sliced through the passageway.

It was a vertical slash from top to bottom.

The sturdy passageway of reinforced concrete tilted like a poorly-made slide as it crumbled.

There was no human flesh among the rubble.

Luckily, Aogami Pierce and the others had somehow escaped to the flat building.

But now that they were in this thing’s sights, fleeing into the sky would be suicide. They could glide forever thanks to the heat wave’s updrafts, but it would be slow going. Who could say how many times over they would be shot down before reaching the other rooftop?

To reiterate, Kamijou could not allow everyone to be wiped out here. The entire school would dry up without potable pool water and he was not going to let himself lose a classmate here.

(Kh…)

As the Element itself reacted to the great noise, Kamijou slammed his right fist into the arachnid Wind Element that had approached quite close. The yellow light inside vanished, it stopped moving, and it collapsed to the ground like a building block robot with its joints removed.

He doubted these things could understand him, but he yelled at the other one.

“Over here, monster!! I’m the only one with the power to kill you!!”

“Wait! Kamijou!?”

He did not wait for Fukiyose’s response.

He ran in a different direction from her. And he made sure to kick the head of the unmoving maneki-gumo’s corpse on the way. He had no idea if the Elements had a sense of camaraderie or if they even had a concept of disrespect to the dead, but the common octopus Water Element clearly changed tactics.

Without even looking toward the fleeing pointy-haired boy, it fiercely pursued him with its many tentacles.

He could never escape on foot.

And…

“…!!!???”

It had another specialty attack.

A laser of ultra-high pressure water shot through the night. He did not have time to aim his right hand, so he dove to the ground and somehow managed to avoid it.

When he looked back, something was not right.

Fukiyose and the others who had been thrown outside should have been by the broken passageway behind the common octopus, but the area was being enveloped by something like a giant fluffy mass of white cotton candy.

(Wha-…?)

He soon found the answer.

A few torrents of water lost their momentum and rained down on the road.

It was nothing but water.

To Kamijou’s group, it was the symbol of blessings.

But the asphalt had soaked up as much heat as a stone stove, so a fierce change came over the water upon contact. In the blink of an eye, the liquid became white steam and spread out across the entire area.

“Wah, cough, cough!!”

The reading from his body’s thermometer clearly changed.

The apparent temperature in a sauna was adjusted by throwing water on a heated stone. The actual air temperature did not change, but gasses and liquids could change the heat on the skin and one’s rate of exhaustion.

Their stamina would quickly be worn away with the water being scattered so indiscriminately.

The common octopus’s greatest strength was not its anti-air cannon.

By scattering steam over a wide area, it wore down people’s stamina and created a smokescreen . Then its powerful and speedy attacks could finish them off.

(But even before that…)

The common octopus’s giant body burst through its own wall of steam as it approached.

Its tentacles were thicker than steel beams and they reached out to grab and twist apart the boy’s body.

“Ooooaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

As soon as a tentacle wrapped around him and lifted him up, Kamijou reflexively used his right hand to punch the translucent appendage.

Whatever else it could do, this Element could be stopped with Imagine

Breaker.

But then the entire tentacle fell off at the base.

No, had it been cut away to prevent his power from propagating to the rest of it!?

(Oh, no…)

Even if it had been destroyed, he still could not move with the tentacle around his torso.

Then the common octopus with the blue willow-o'-the-wisp targeted him from just barely out of arm's reach.

It would show no mercy as it fired that ultra-high pressure water.

(Is this the end?)

Was Fukiyose's group all right inside all that steam? Was Aogami Pierce's group okay inside the flat building? Would they get the water purification microbe mud back to the school to secure the pool water? Would everyone at the school be okay? Would Index and Othinus be okay?

Nothing was certain.

He clenched his teeth.

And at that very moment, a great number of lights dropped from overhead and pierced the Class 3 common octopus almost too easily.

Kamijou had no idea what had happened.

It almost looked like a precision guided bombing with accuracy down to a few dozen centimeters. The common octopus's giant body shattered like glass and the tentacle binding Kamijou's torso was torn to pieces. The boy was thrown to the scorching asphalt, but he could not get up and simply stared up into the night sky while lying on his back.

The curtain of steam had been blown away and the moon was visible.

A strange form cut by overhead as if to slice through that bright heavenly object.

(What…is that?)

It flew in a straight line.

It flew in something like an invasion route while launching a great downpour of attacks. Some looked like metal shells and others looked like laser beams. The attacks had to be targeting the other Elements on the ground. Despite the intense explosions, there was no sign of the building collapsing.

The heat wave should have brought down all the next generation electronic weapons that Anti-Skill used.

But that was not what surprised Kamijou the most.

He stared up at the weapon tearing through so many targets on its first attack run as it made a calm turn in the night sky.

(That isn't a fighter jet or an attack helicopter. That silhouette… *That's a human*!?)

Yes.

Armor had been added to the limbs and countless cannons stuck out from the back, but it mostly looked like a human silhouette with other parts added on. And this was not a giant humanoid weapon. Definite alluring feminine curves could be seen in the bodylines illuminated by the moonlight.

It was a girl with short brown hair.

It was a girl wearing a school's racing swimsuit.

It was a girl with bluish-white sparks coming not just from her bangs but from the entire device attached to various parts of her body.

Kamijou finally recalled what they had seen on the way to the water department.

They had faintly seen distant lights that may have been the flamethrowers of Fire Elements. They had found it odd that anyone would be out on the surface taking on a group of Elements at this time of night, so they had speculated the Elements were luring people out with the flames like a footballfish. However, that was not the case.

There really had been an esper who could hunt down the Elements and reclaim a safe zone.

"Misaka…Mikoto!?"

She was Academy City's #3.

She was an undisputed ace known as the Railgun.

But something was different.

Over the racing swimsuit she likely wore to deal with the heat wave, armor covered her limbs, countless cannons extended from her back, and plasma-like bluish-white light fired backwards as she broke free of gravity's grip. As Kamijou looked up at her in the moonlight, he did not see a savior. He saw…

But before he could finish that thought, he started feeling woozy.

He felt like he had been hit by some kind of venom, but that was not the case. It was a simpler threat.

(Oh…no… The steam is making me…lightheaded…)

Heatstroke.

Dehydration.

By the time he realized what was happening, tremendous pain swelled out from deep in his head. Unable to fight it, his vision was filled with vague darkness.

In the final moment, a hazy image ruled his mind.

It was a girl in the moonlight.

It was an extraordinary force capable of slaying the Elements.

But to him, it looked like…

(A winged…*demon*…)

Then he passed out.

Like someone had hit a TV’s power button.

Between the Lines 2

“Nyah, nyah.”

A small girl spoke in the great heat of District 13.

“It’s soooo hot…”

Her name was Fremea Seivelun. She had long, wavy blonde hair and blue eyes.

This district was known for its many elementary schools. An intense heat wave had brought temperatures nearly to 60 degrees and the mysterious Elements were attacking the city. That district should have been the first to fall to that double threat, but that was not what had happened. Fremea wore her school swimsuit and she was entirely unharmed. The large pool towel she could use while changing had been soaked in the bucket of salt water at her feet and she fanned herself with it. She was using the evaporation heat to cool her down as much as possible.

“Nyah,” she said to the classmate next to her. “In the first place, Azumi, will this really make me feel cooler?”

“I-it should. It said so in the textbook.”

The glasses girl with pigtails must have been shy because her pool towel was wrapped around her like a cloak to hide her swimsuit-wearing body from view. Her face was red, but that was not due to the heat wave. Her skin and hair suggested it was not an issue with her health either.

There were two main reasons the two of them were still alive.

First, most of the elementary school students and teachers had been quickly evacuated to the Learning Core, a landmark in District 13, shortly after the problem began. It was a sturdy and tall building with large grounds and many different educational facilities: a zoo, an aquarium, a library, a museum, an art museum, a sports field, an indoor pool, etc. It had plenty of emergency supplies and the aquarium and indoor pool were especially helpful. With those, it would take a lot for the place to dry up.

Second, someone had sensed immediate danger and taken actual action shortly after the problem began. And they had of course brought in enough personnel to protect the place from danger.

“Lions are supposed to be the king of the jungle, but they were collapsed in the heat. Didn’t they come from Africa?”

As some chatting boys in swim trunks passed by in the hallway, shy Azumi held the pool towel more tightly around her and readjusted the swimsuit.

“Nyah!”

Fremea wore her wet pool towel like a cape and noticed something out the window. She ran down the stopped escalator and toward the entrance.

There was no barricade in place.

A friend of hers stepped in through the reinforced glass door.

“How are things outside? Were you okay?”

“I am fine.”

It was a girl only a little taller than Fremea, but no adult would notice any real height difference. She had long white hair and wore the swimsuit that had been forced onto her, but she showed no sign of sweat.

Her name was Fräulein Kreutune.

According to classified Academy City documents, she was an immortal girl. Thus, the nearly 60 degree heat wave and the fierce Elements were of little concern to her. Not only could she fight them, but (even if it was a secret to Fremea and the others) she could *act as bait as often as necessary.* She would draw the Elements away from the Learning Core and gather supplies from the empty elementary schools and student dorms in the area, so no ally could be more reliable.

Fräulein patted at her white swimsuit as if to brush off some dust.

As she did, something like shattered glass scattered from her short and slender body.

Needless to say, they were fragments of “something”.

“I defeated three of them while out on patrol. Vee.”

“Nyah. That sounds like fun. I want to go out too.”

“You need to study, Fremea.”

“Nyah! In the first place, it’s not like you don’t have to study too!!”

As they spoke, they climbed the stopped escalator. That was when a round white chicken ran down the hallway toward them. Shy Azumi chased after the fleeing chicken and struggled to catch it. The chicken finally clung to Fräulein Kreutune’s barefoot leg. It was apparently her companion(?).

She looked down at the white bird with cold, emotionless eyes.

“Come to think of it, I saw a rhinoceros beetle out there. It was a big white one.”

“Nyah! So he’s out there too. In the first place, it’s no fair that everyone but me gets all the fun!!”

“I defeated three of them, but he defeated six. Then he said ‘what a nuisance’ and began shooting up the flower mantis and the ant-mimicking spider.”

Chapter 2: Attacking a Base with a High-Class Girl – Tower_of_the_Crystal.

Part 1

Kamijou Touma felt dizzy.

He could tell he was wearing his swim shorts and that someone had laid him down, but it did not feel like a stretcher below him.

“Ugh…”

He shook his muddy mind.

He felt a scorching heat on his chest, stomach, and everything else. However, this was not the air of the heat wave or the asphalt and concrete heated like a stone stove. Experience told him what this was. The slippery sensation surrounding him was a liquid. In a hellish 55 degrees, a bottle of water would rise to a temperature ten degrees higher than a hot bath.

That thought rapidly brought his focus back to reality.

Water? Someone was using valuable water? And not to drink but to pour over his body?

“Ah, ahhh, ahhhhhh!?”

He panicked and tried to get up, but his body refused to listen.

When his senses finally caught up, he found himself on a rooftop in the late night darkness.

He was lying on his back and the high-class Tokiwadai Middle School girl named Misaka Mikoto was sitting nearby and peering down at his face.

She wore a racing swimsuit and poured a clear two liter bottle of water over him.

“C-c’mon, don’t move. And what were you all even doing here? You’re covered in mud.”

“M-Misaka? Huh? But…that’s water!?”

“Hm?”

She cutely tilted her head.

Behind her, he saw the steel winged demonic silhouette. There were weapons that looked like tank guns, Gatling guns, laser cannons, flamethrowers, excavation drills, and more sticking up as if inside an umbrella stand. Mikoto wore a swimsuit, presumably to help with the heat, but the hand holding the water bottle was covered in armor from elbow to fingertips. The cables wrapped around her soft upper arms and thighs may have been to control the devices.

Kamijou had no idea what to make of this.

“What? What in the world is that?”

“Oh, you haven’t seen *this version* yet, have you?”

Just after her casual reply, a light appeared in the late night darkness. It was not a streetlight or a flashlight. Just like a firework, it was a blue light made from burning a thin piece of metal. When Mikoto saw it, she set down the water bottle and brushed up her sweat-soaked bangs with her armored hand.

“Oops. Wait just a second.”

A moment later, one of the feathers making up the wings (i.e. a tank gun) produced a frightening explosive roar.

The blast was powerful enough to send Kamijou rolling along the rooftop just after he started to sit up.

A shell flew in an orange arc toward the distant point of light fired into the air and it fell through the gaps in the dark buildings.

There was a flash of light, a short delay, and a thunderous roar.

The phenomenon reminded Kamijou of a lightning strike, but it was actually a shell landing and exploding.

A new green light flashed. It was most likely a flare.

“Hit confirmed. Destruction complete.”

After checking the color of the light, Mikoto recited those two quick phrases in a singsong voice.

“Sorry about that. I’m not obligated to do so, but I like to help defeat the Elements when I see a request for assistance. I’d like to know if Uiharu-san and Saten-san are okay, but finding them hasn’t been easy. So to help protect anyone I know, I’ve been working to eliminate as many of the Elements as possible in this area. So…huh? How much had I told you?”

“…”

Kamijou had no words.

He still did not know what that was Misaka Mikoto was wearing, but was this how different the world was when the #3 Railgun, one of Academy City’s seven Level 5s, was around?

They had been so afraid of even running across a single Element that they had risked their lives sliding down wires strung between buildings, so this was simply too different.

There was so much he wanted to ask.

He stated his first question while working his dizzy head and managing to move his arms and legs enough to get up.

“Where are the others? What happened to Fukiyose and Aogami Pierce…?”

“Um, do you really think I can answer you when you name people I’ve never met and even use a nickname for one of them? Who are you talking about?”

“My classmates. They were attacked by the Elements at the water department!”

“Hmm.” Mikoto tilted her head like she was watching a quiz show on TV. “I’m really not sure. I did slaughter all of the Elements in that area, so I doubt there’s any reason to worry about their safety. They probably returned to their base.”

She casually mentioned an unthinkable word, but he doubted she was lying.

He recalled the steel winged demon flying through the night sky and the Elements being turned to Swiss cheese after looking like such a hopeless obstacle.

This girl could pull that off.

This was not one-on-one hand-to-hand combat where either side could die. Countless shells had rained down and wiped them all out with no friendly fire damage whatsoever.

Kamijou finally breathed a sigh of relief.

Fukiyose and Aogami Pierce had safely returned to the school. And with the water purification microbe mud from the water department. Once they could drink the pool-full of water, the shelter’s strained atmosphere would vanish. They could hole up there until this was all over without Index, Othinus, or the others getting caught in any unnecessary conflict.

They were safe.

They had been saved.

Kamijou had been collected by Mikoto and taken here because they had decided to leave him behind in the confusion, but he did not feel shocked or angry. He was just glad that the situation was headed in a positive direction.

“Oh, right. I need to contact them. …Hey, Misaka? What building is this? Do you know which way to my school?”

“Ohhh, your school? I stopped by it earlier, but it had collapsed into rubble.”

“!?”

Kamijou felt his throat instantly dry up.

He felt like an invisible hand was squeezing at his heart.

What had happened while he slept? Had the Elements made a major attack? Was everyone in the school okay? So many thoughts spiraled around in his head, but…

“There weren’t even any real barricades up. There obviously weren’t any normal lights on, but there wasn’t any from fires either. Were you really hiding there? It didn’t look like it would be much help.”

“Oh.”

That was right. He had forgotten.

The Magic God known as the High Priest had partially destroyed his school, so they were borrowing empty classrooms at the Jumpy Bunny’s school. But Mikoto was unaware of that. They were talking about two different schools, so she had gone to the wrong place.

He scratched at his bangs.

“Anyway, can you tell me where we are? I need to get back and let them know I’m all right.”

“Sorry, but no.” Mikoto readily rejected the idea. “Your heatstroke is a lot worse than you think. Do you know what time it is?”

“No. Around four in the morning?”

His cellphone did not work, so he had no clock at hand. He gave a guess based on the fact that they had left for the water department at around two in the morning.

But Mikoto shook her head.

“It’s already past six.”

“You’re kidding… How long was I out!?”

“That isn’t your fault, but do you see how weak you are? I tried giving you water and placing a wet towel on you, but it isn’t enough. …That means I’ll have to take you somewhere with more specialized equipment, even if it’s supposed to be girls only.”

“?”

“I don’t know where you were hiding before, but if it doesn’t have the equipment to heal you, I’m not taking you back there. Come with me. If you want to let them know you’re all right, you need to make sure you really *are* all right first.”

“But…!”

He leaned forward, but that was enough to make him dizzy.

He started to fall forward, so Mikoto gently grabbed his shoulders with her armored hands and supported him.

She then whispered in his ear.

“And based on what we’re planning, it might be best for your friends if you come with us. You might end up saving them.”

What?

What was she talking about?

Kamijou blinked his eyes in confusion, but she said nothing more. The racing swimsuit girl looked around while supporting his body.

“It’s almost time for sunrise. Let’s get back. We can talk more once you have your strength back.”

“Eh? Wait, wah!?”

Kamijou Touma cried out hysterically.

Mikoto circled behind him and passed her arms below his arms to grab ahold of him. It was a lot like the safety bars on a roller coaster.

A moment later, they took flight.

The steel winged demon took its true form.

It only took an instant.

Truly in only an instant, Kamijou’s view changed to something like a search engine’s map app or satellite service.

He guessed they were one or two hundred meters up.

He started feeling silly for thinking of the wires between buildings as “elevated”.

“How does it feel?” quietly asked Misaka Mikoto as bluish-white light erupted from the boosters attached around her round hips.

Kamijou answered honestly as she held him in her arms with his unsupported legs dangling down.

“I’m a little distracted by this really strong feminine scent and the soft sensation squishing against the back of my head. Oh, I get it. You’re wearing a swimsuit, aren’t you?”

“…!!!???”

“Stop wobbling, Misaka! And if you let go, I’ll fall to my death!!”

“D-d-d-don’t make it sound like I’m some kind of pervert walking around town in a swimsuit! You gave in to the heat too, didn’t you!?”

A boiling heat still filled the night and the city down below was dark. The power was dead and the city had ceased to function. But at the same time, there were unsteady flickering light sources. If they were not coming from Fire Elements, then they were fires started by humans.

This was not over yet.

And the number of lights was surprisingly high. He belatedly realized just how many other people were out there building barricades and fighting against the heat wave and the Elements.

He felt his tear ducts loosening.

He felt like a lost child finding his mother after wandering through an unfamiliar city.

Some blue flashing lights appeared here and there.

“Cover your ears and open your mouth. This is going to be a little loud.”

After Mikoto’s comment, the steel winged demon changed course.

They took a zigzagging route between the blue lights, the arms on her back squirmed, and a great number of shells and beams shot toward the surface.

A single stray shot could have caused a major disaster.

But Mikoto did not miss. The shots weaved perfectly through the gaps between buildings and exterminated the Elements walking on the surface.

Green lights were added where the blue lights had appeared earlier.

Hit confirmed. Destruction complete.

“All done.”

“What’s that glittering over there? It looks like some flashlights on the surface.”

“Those are fluorescent lights. That’s probably a trash dump.”

“So…not streetlights? Should we go check them out?”

“Don’t worry. If they aren’t moving around in someone’s hand, I seriously doubt there’s anyone there. …Wait, does that mean you haven’t figured it out? Well, it is true most places have switched to LED lights for energy conservation or whatever.”

“?”

Mikoto flew right past and Kamijou looked puzzled.

And he had a more fundamental question than just the lights down below.

(I thought the heat wave had taken out all of the electronics like our cellphones. So how is that thing on Misaka’s back working?)

Was it because she was a skilled Electromaster?

He doubted it was that simple.

Not to mention…

(What even is it?)

His hazy mind was full of questions.

She had washed the mud from his body. Using valuable water for nothing more than that was simply too far removed from the boy’s current view of the world.

He asked the most immediate question.

“So where are we headed?”

“My home of course.”

As Mikoto held him from behind, her answer slipped into his ear.

“Tokiwadai Middle School.”

Part 2

District 7 contained a special zone filled with prestigious girl's schools.

It was known as the School Garden.

Those girls were sheltering in Tokiwadai Middle School and the territory it shared with the other schools. Since most people were not allowed inside, that territory was surrounded by tall walls. The entrance gates were fortified with barricades and watchtowers were built at even intervals along the wall to allow a view out from within.

And of course, high level esper girls took turns as guards.

If the Elements got close, they would intercept them. If that was not enough, they would call for air support from the flying steel-winged demon.

Mikoto apparently did not need a runway for takeoff or landing. She weakened the force of the two boosters to decelerate in midair and descend onto her schoolyard like a helicopter.

Kamijou Touma had actually been thrown into the School Garden once before (as a part of a plot by Tsuchimikado Motoharu), but this was his first time at Tokiwadai Middle School itself. It looked more like a white mansion than a school. Since the School Garden as a whole was barricaded, the school's windows and doors had not been covered. Compared to this, the life Kamijou had been living felt downright primitive.

But that was not the biggest surprise.

"What…is that?"

"?"

His knees nearly gave out the instant he set foot on the schoolyard.

But not just due to the heatstroke.

The schoolyard's dirt was dry and cracked, but that stopped partway along. A flower garden decorated the sidewalk alongside the school building. And it was not filled with shriveled brown weeds.

It was just past six in the morning, so it was just in time for sunrise.

The sunlight began to illuminate the entire scene before Kamijou's baffled eyes. Color filled the dark night. That was true of the white mansion and the sidewalk flower garden. He saw bright reds, yellows, and blues on the sunlit flowers.

"You're kidding… They haven't withered? You've been watering the flowers during this heat wave!?"

That was not all.

At the intersection between two flower gardens, something else glittered in the sunlight.

A pillar of water erupted from a modest fountain.

"That's…insane…"

"Is it that weird? With several espers, it isn't difficult to search for underground water veins."

"…"

"I don't know what things were like where you were before." Mikoto responded to Kamijou's dumbfounded look with an exasperated sigh. "But water is more than *just* something to drink. It might look like a luxury, but you need to look after your mental health too. In the long run, this will conserve more water. When people can't manage their stress, their desires grow more and more simplified. They start to use food and sleep to deal with the stress that hobbies and entertainment used to handle. Have you ever eaten too much just because you were stressed? It's all over once you start confusing the water you need to live with the water used to escape your stress.”

That seemed to describe Kamijou’s school perfectly.

They wanted to stock up on and preserve their water more than anyone, but water had been the only thing on their mind. They had not been able to think about anything else.

Had they been trapping themselves like that?

Had that been hastening the consumption of water, building up even more irritation, and creating the buds of conflict?

“It’s all so unrewarding,” muttered Kamijou.

“It sounds like your home might be in trouble. You can tell me all about it once you’re feeling better. If we don’t go save them soon, things could fall apart in a number of ways: running out of water, an Element attack, or infighting.”

Either they had guard shifts here as well or these high-class girls simply woke up early. When they saw Mikoto and Kamijou land in the schoolyard, girls gathered from the white mansion. Instead of their personal swimsuits, they all wore the same design of racing swimsuit as Mikoto. It was probably required by the school. That showed another difference in “character” from the school Kamijou had been in.

It was not a shelter where different groups had gathered. They maintained the colors of a single unified school.

That gave them more leeway to act.

The swimsuit girls smiled at Misaka Mikoto and spoke with a carefree tone that did not match Kamijou’s internal clock.

“Welcome back, Misaka-san.”

“You must be exhausted. Thank you for your air support.”

“Now, now. We have food prepared over here.”

As they spoke, they reached for the armor and weapons on Mikoto’s limbs and back. It must have been difficult to remove on one’s own because the racing swimsuit #3 let them do it without complaint.

She gave an awkward look as they removed the armor from her back, but then she spoke to Kamijou.

“This is like a new club. I had a garage prepared and leave the constructed device there. These girls can handle the maintenance on their own.”

“Oh, wow. There are girls in swimsuits everywhere. Talk about pressure…”

“Are you even listening, you idiot!? You sure are calm for someone in such a critical state!!”

With a fairly violent-sounding sound much like the severing of a train’s high-voltage wire, bluish-white sparks scattered from her bangs.

“Anyway…”

The other girls followed the course of the conversation with their eyes, so their focus belatedly turned toward Kamijou.

He was out of place in this girls only school.

“Who is this gentleman?”

“Gentleman?”

“Oh, my! Now that you mention it, that is a gentleman!”

“So this is what I have seen in my dreams…!”

It was quite a commotion. Plus, one of them sounded like she had some latent sluttiness mixed in.

“O-Onee…Onee-sama!?”

The crowd was filled with a mixture of fear and curiosity, but then another girl forced her way through. She had long brown twintails, she wore the same racing swimsuit as everyone else, and she had leather belts wrapped around her thighs. Her body was coated in sweat and a few tufts of her twintails stuck out, but her eyes drew Kamijou’s attention most of all. The pupils were opened wide, as if she had seen something truly unbelievable.

“Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-why did you rendezvous with some rotten ape!? In fact, where did you even find him!? No, you may not keep him! Go put him back where you found him right this instant!!”

“K-Kuroko? Calm down. I can explain. It might take a while, but…”

Mikoto trailed off when she spotted something behind Shirai Kuroko.

A girl had casually blended into the crowd despite her unique presence. She had long honey blonde hair, bodylines unbelievably nice for a middle school girl, and a small brand-name purse with its thin, plastic strap worn diagonally across her racing swimsuit. She was the Queen who reigned opposite the Ace as Tokiwadai Middle School’s two Level 5s.

Her name was Shokuhou Misaki.

She wore long white gloves and she spun a long skinny object in her hands.

It was a TV remote.

It was a symbol that helped control her own Mental Out power.

The gentle smile in her eyes spoke for her.

She pressed a remote against the back of Shirai Kuroko’s head as the girl continued fussing. If nothing was done about this commotion, she would do something about it herself.

“…”

Mikoto tensed up, but then Shokuhou whispered softly into Shirai Kuroko's ear.

"(If you hand over that gentleman, who has such an excellent attention gathering ability, you can do whatever you want with your beloved Onee-sama. Not a bad deal for either of us, don't you think?)"

"F-fwohhhhhh!! I-I'll never have a better chance to make Onee-sama mine while separating her from not just that ape but from her own kind as well!!!"

"What nonsense are you pouring into my underclassman's heat-addled mind, Shokuhouuuuuuuu!? And wait…not so close…ahhh, you're covered in sweat!!"

After a mysterious three and a half twists leading into a tackle to the waist, Misaka Mikoto and Shirai Kuroko rolled away together. They left the ring of people. Kamijou was caught off guard by the novel forms of communication used at a high-class girl's school, but then he started feeling dizzy again.

He had been freed, but he had not recovered yet.

Without Mikoto’s shoulder for support, he would succumb to his own body weight before long.

But just as he was about to collapse to the side, another girl gently supported him.

The racing swimsuit girl had long honey blonde hair and a brand-name purse.

“Hee hee hee. Caught you ☆ “

“…?”

Who is this? wondered Kamijou with a frown.

He felt like he knew her quite well but also like he did not know her at all. It may have been due to the heatstroke hampering his brainpower and it may have just been the familiarity of seeing the same racing swimsuit that Mikoto was wearing. He did not know what kind of weird connection his brain was making, but when he saw the girl’s smile from so close, it brought a certain thought to mind.

It looked just like the innocent smile of a small child.

And it seemed oddly familiar.

“Oh, I’m sure you won’t remember me, so don’t worry about it.”

The blonde girl suppressed the smile that seemed to have escaped onto her lips.

“But I can tell just by looking at your face. There’s a lot you want to ask, but you need to regain your strength first. Eh heh heh. I’m all grown up now, so I can take you to the infirmary.”

She tugged on his arm and placed it around her shoulder. A sweet scent reached him from her hair and he could feel the heat from her flushed skin.

But he did not have time to feel his heart pounding. The blonde girl just about collapsed under his weight.

She did not seem to have much muscular strength.

“Oh! Oh, no!”

“Queen.”

A girl with splendid ringlet curls reached in from the side like a helper, but Shokuhou held out her empty hand to stop her.

“I appreciate the thought.”

“But…”

“Please. …Can you let me do this on my own?”

There was a strange power to her quiet voice.

The ringlet curl girl argued no further and started guiding the other girls instead.

“I know this is being selfish, but my pride demands I show you I’ve changed some since then.”

“?”

Kamijou was confused, but he did not have time to actually ask about it.

He heard large wheels rolling through gravel. He looked over and saw girls dragging a wooden cart that looked out of place at this high-class school.

He tried to move out of the way so it could get past, but then he felt a squeezing at his heart.

It resembled an existing plant or animal.

It was made of a substance similar to translucent glass.

It was an Element.

That great enemy was being casually carted around like old trash.

It was most likely a Class 1. It was about three meters tall. However, it had already been defeated, so the will-o'-the-wisp of a core was missing from the center and its joints had come apart. He could tell at a glance that it would not be moving anymore.

The girls pulling and pushing the cart from the front and back smiled at the blonde girl with no real tension.

"What about this one?"

"Hmm. Take it to the gym like usual. I know Misaka-san's hanger takes priority, but we really need a proper lab instead of something with so much makeshift ability."

"And who is-…? C-could that be the legendary creature known as a gentleman!?"

"You don't get to study him in the lab ☆ "

The high-class girls seemed more interested in the boy on campus than the mysterious Elements. That showed just how low a priority those were. The Elements were not absolute enemies to them. They could defeat them and analyze them.

(So this is the difference esper powers make.)

Kamijou thought about that fact again.

(Does the world really look this different with enough high level espers around?)

His vision shook.

He was in the early morning schoolyard, but his vision blinked in and out like a dying fluorescent light.

Oh, no, he thought.

Something was breaking. He was losing his support. He was going to fall.

But just before he did…

“There’s nothing to worry about.”

He had not said a word, but a gentle voice reached him.

It was the mysterious blonde girl who was struggling so hard to lend him her shoulder.

“It’s true some people are more suited to some things than others, but that doesn’t mean you can’t try your hand at something you aren’t suited to. You know that very well, don’t you?”

“…?”

He once more asked himself who she was. He was fairly certain she was not someone who knew him well enough to practically read his mind like this, but…

“If you feel like taking that sort of challenge, I’ll stick with you as many times as it takes.”

She breathed a somewhat sorrowful sigh.

Then the blonde girl continued with a bright smile.

“I doubt you'll remember, but that doesn't mean I can't try, right? ☆“

Part 3

He had fallen asleep.

"…………………………………………………………………………… ……………………………………………………………………………… ……………………………………………………………………………"

In an infirmary that smelled of disinfectant, Kamijou Touma sat up in the bed and froze in place.

Covering his face with his hands did not change reality.

The sun had already risen high into the sky. It was probably around midday.

He wanted to let Index and Othinus know he was okay, he wanted to know if Aogami Pierce and Fukiyose Seiri were okay, and he wanted to know if the water purification microbe mud had resolved the potable water problem. And yet he was stuck here. Not even this place had the air conditioning back up and the infirmary was wrapped in boiling heat, but there was one devilish tool here.

"D-dammit… How can something as simple as a water pillow steal away Kamijou-san's soul so easily? I'm so shallow I want to die! But how is this even remotely fair, dammiiiiiiiiiiiit!?"

Not only was the pillow filled with water, but it had some kind of chemical inside too. It maintained the chill of a canned drink straight out of the fridge and it had a somewhat minty smell.

The girl with honey blonde hair sat on the round chair next to the bed, crossed her long slender legs, and cooled her forehead with a liquid-filled plastic bag like the ones used for the goldfish won at goldfish scooping. She giggled.

"The human mind has trouble fighting the most primitive desires, so it's nothing to be ashamed of. And you must have been very tired.”

“I gave in! I gave in to my desires!! Wahhhhhhh!!!!!”

Kamijou felt somewhat defiled, but he oddly felt no desire to quickly take any kind of action to make up for oversleeping.

According to Mikoto, all of the Elements around the water department had been wiped out, so Aogami Pierce, Fukiyose Seiri, and the others would be fine as long as they had not hung around for no real reason. If they had brought back the water purification microbe mud, the potable water problem would have been solved and the decaying relationship between schools would have been mended.

He was worrying them since they did not know if he was okay, but he could deal with that later. In fact, he was starting to feel like he should bring back as much information as possible.

“I have some questions.”

“I’m a little worried you won’t remember much of my answers, but I say ask away. Still, you should probably ask Misaka-san the same questions later to fill in the ‘gaps’.”

“?”

“You don’t need to understand. I’m just saying it’s best to have multiple sources. You want the most accuracy ability you can get, don’t you?”

“Hmm. Not a bad idea. Are middle school girls really this calm these days? I mean, you just seem so different from Misaka. You’re more like a big sister.”

“Heh.”

Something must have struck her as funny because the mature-looking girl started laughing.

“Heh hah. Eh heh heh ha ha ha ha ha!! Yes, yes, yes. That’s what I want from you. I’m not the same girl I was back then. And I won’t let you say these common breasts disqualify me from providing the support of a young woman!!”

“???”

(Wh-what kind of spoiled bastard told a girl as blessed as this that she had common breasts? Whoever they are, they can go straight to hell!!)

Kamijou did not understand any of this, but the topic of discussion led his eyes down to the blonde girl’s ample breasts.

Either due to the heat or due to Kamijou’s gaze, the racing swimsuit girl moved the bag of water from her forehead and squeezed it into the chest of her swimsuit.

Kamijou was left speechless, so a hint of teasing entered the girl’s smile and she stretched her arms upwards to push out her chest. The large mounds pressed against the swimsuit even more.

“They get so sweaty when they’re big. I suppose a boy wouldn’t understand, though.”

“M-more importantly!!”

“Yes! Yes! I’m finally being rewarded for those days of mockery!! Oh, revenge is so delightful.”

She desperately kept her lips from relaxing and an irregular tremor ran down her spine.

“Ahh. I wish I could do this forever, but I suppose that isn’t an option.”

“Do you know something about that thing Misaka was using?”

There were a lot of differences between Kamijou’s school and Tokiwadai Middle School, but the biggest one was the strange flying machine that Mikoto used. He felt like its presence had freed these girls from the fear of the Elements and given them the environment they needed to focus on the heat wave.

“I don’t know. That I can’t tell you.”

But the blonde girl expressed ignorance on that key to her survival.

She did not know.

“The heat wave and the Elements arrived without warning, but Misaka-san’s machine was also incredibly sudden. Out of the blue, that lone wolf of a girl requests the creation of a new club and then she loses herself in mechanical work using the space she was given.”

“Wait a second.” Kamijou interrupted. “Are you saying that wasn’t put together as a way to fight the Elements?”

In that case, why had Misaka Mikoto felt the need to build up that kind of firepower in the original, peaceful world?

A motorcycle gang with handguns might seem reliable in a city overrun by zombies, but it did raise certain questions. Where had those guns come from? And why had they had them on hand?

The swimsuit girl pulled the water bag from her impressive cleavage and stuck it under her armpit.

“Didn’t I tell you? I don’t know. Of course, I seriously doubt Misaka-san is in league with the Elements to show off. And I’m only overlooking it because we need all the help we can get to overcome this.”

The blonde girl used her empty hand to spin a TV remote like a baton and continued in an exasperated tone.

“If only I could control those Elements with my Mental Out, but it looks like physical force with plenty of savage ability is a better match. Thanks to that, I’ve fallen into the background and have to work as something like a class president who keeps an eye on things to make sure the school can continue to function as an organization. But it’s not like I want to run around outside in this awful heat, so I’m not really complaining.”

“It looked like she would bombard things if people put out a request, but how large an area does she cover?”

“I don’t know that either. My guess is just this southern part of District 7 where the School Garden is located. But Misaka-san needs to eat and sleep too, so she’s still just a volunteer. She can’t exterminate all of the Elements with 24/7 support.”

Even now, Kamijou’s school was living in fear of the Elements while also in southern District 7, but even those hellish days had been somewhat protected. It was possible the entire school building would have been inundated by monsters if Mikoto had not been sporadically wearing down their numbers. The possibility made him shudder, but it brought another thought to mind.

“Come to think of it, you were collecting the defeated Elements. What for?”

“To dissect them. Or maybe disassemble would be the better word.”

The racing swimsuit girl smoothly gave an unbelievable answer.

“Our main goals are learning about their bodily structure to find a weak point and checking for sensory organs to learn how they communicate. If we investigate their throat and find the frequency range they use to speak, we might be able to confuse them with similar sound waves.”

“…”

They were on a different level entirely.

They were far beyond throwing bricks from rooftops and relying on a desperate charge from Imagine Breaker while the Element flinched back. The girls of Tokiwadai Middle School still had human rationality.

“But since we’re still gathering their corpses, you might be able to guess we’re far from finished there. If we want to study how they live, we need a living sample, but we can’t think of any kind of cage that can perfectly contain an Element.”

The blonde girl placed the cold water bag on her thighs and then slid it below her knees.

“It would be nice if Misaka-san could watch them from a distance like a birdwatcher instead of blindly blasting them all. She can defeat them without worrying about the details, so she refuses to go to trouble of gathering information like that.”

“…I can’t believe this.”

“Really?” The blonde girl responded honestly and with no humility. “I’m personally more impressed by the way you struggled to survive this long and never gave up hope despite every calculation you made proving you were gradually using up all of your limited resources and manpower. I mean, we’re doing this because we know we can. If we had everything taken from us, I’m not too confident we would be able to crawl back up from the bottom.”

“We’re not all that great.”

He did not decorate his response either.

While being worn down by the heat wave and the Elements, Kamijou’s group had taken a step down the path of bandits. It was all to get water and water purifying microbes. They had snuck into buildings without permission quite a few times and what would have happened if they had run into students from another school? Would they have peacefully talked it out? Or would they have given up on their share of the water and handed it over? …Of course not. In that tense a situation, Kamijou would have clenched his fist and truly crossed the final line.

But the blonde girl laughed and said more.

“But even so, *you didn’t cross that final line.* Isn’t that right?”

“…”

"Hee hee. That's what makes you so strong. You aren't too stupid to imagine it and you can list plenty of hypothetical situations, *but you wouldn't actually do it.* No matter what kind of crisis you found yourself in, you would protect that final line when it actually came down to it. Even if it put you at a disadvantage, you would accept that disadvantage. That is a noble thing. We only do what we know we can, so who can say if we would make the same decision."

He had thought his school was inferior. He had thought they were inhuman and shameful.

But was he allowed to be proud of those few days of desperately working with the others to stay alive?

"Of course you are. Being alive is a noble thing in and of itself."

The blonde girl seemed to be peering into his eyes as she spoke.

Her voice had an odd strength it had lacked before.

"So you and your friends should be rewarded for all the effort you put into surviving this long. Don't worry. Leave everything else to your big sister here ☆ We'll have all of this dealt with in a few days' time."

"Dealt with…?"

Kamijou blankly repeated her words.

After a short pause, he grabbed the blonde girl's shoulders.

"Kyah."

"By dealt with, do you mean you see an end to this!? You see an end to this seemingly hopeless problem!?"

"N-n-n-n-not so close! I-I mean, it's not a bad thing, but, um, no…don't sell yourself so cheaply, Shokuhou Misaki. Don’t give in just because you’ve dreamed of this moment. Work to keep your cool!!”

“!?”

She shoved him back toward the bed.

She cleared her throat, sat back on the round chair, and continued with a blush on her face.

“I-I may have gotten too excited and overstated things somewhat. There are technically two problems at the moment: the heat wave and the Elements.”

“R-right…”

“To be blunt, the heat wave is going to be a challenge, but the Elements are a different matter. We might be able to fundamentally destroy them soon. Instead of sporadically reducing their numbers, it would be a true extermination. That’s what I am talking about.”

Part 4

They had to have used a lot of water on Kamijou before he could walk on his own. And just the day before, that water had been as valuable as pure gold in the dimly-lit and barricaded school building he had sheltered inside.

He sighed in the infirmary and the blonde racing swimsuit girl gave an exasperated sigh of her own.

“We really can’t take our eyes off you for a second, can we? You won’t drink the water we give you and you hide it in places if you have a chance.”

“Y-yeah, but, um, I have my reasons.”

He felt it was wrong of him to drink all the water they brought him when he was just lying in a bed. His school could probably drink the pool water now that they had the water purification microbes, but they had not known exactly how much they needed to create clean water. He knew he needed to recover, but when he saw the bottles of water, he felt an urge to preserve it, stockpile it, and share it with everyone else.

“You really are noble.”

“?”

He had trouble understanding what that girl meant as she gently narrowed her eyes.

At any rate, he could not hog the infirmary bed forever now that he could actually move. Things were not as bad as at his school, but even the Tokiwadai girls might run into some unexpected heatstroke and injuries.

“If you want to know more about defeating the Elements, you’ll have to go ask Misaka-san. And to be honest, that fact does irritate me.”

“Misaka?”

“As you can see, she handles alllll the outside work. Thanks to that, she’s taken a lot of the celebrity ability away from me.”

The blonde girl waved a hand.

“And if she keeps doing everything herself, I get the feeling some unfounded rumors are going to spread. It’s ridiculous to do everything with her power and I really wish she would give everyone else a chance to let off a bit of steam. …But only a bit.”

For some reason, she emphasized that point.

He parted ways with the blonde girl, left the infirmary, and walked down the hall. Where was Misaka Mikoto? He tried to ask a swimsuit girl walking nearby, but she ran away with a quiet shriek. But when he looked around, he noticed people peeking out at him from behind columns. He was a little unsure whether he was being welcomed or rejected.

After walking around aimlessly for a while, he found a promising-looking facility.

It was a separate building from the white mansion.

He guessed it was a club building…or something.

Compared to the Western architecture that matched the overall feel of the School Garden, this area was centered on a boxy building with a modern design. It looked something like an airport storehouse and it was about the size of four normal classrooms.

He had a feeling that girl *whose face he was having trouble recalling* had said something about Misaka requesting the creation of a new club.

If this much space was a single piece of paperwork away, then a high-class girl’s school was even more exceptional than he had thought.

He saw a small human-sized door next to the giant sliding one that covered an entire wall. He made sure to knock before peeking inside.

The floor of the large space was covered with countless weapons, both large and small.

He saw tank guns, laser cannons, flamethrowers, Gatling guns, large chainsaws for use on special steel, anti-trench drills, air-to-air missile containers, precision guided aerial bombs, heavy metal disintegration plasma cannons, electromagnetic burning weapons, ultra-high frequency acoustic cannons, electric melting blades, and fortress-attack large-caliber railguns.

Kamijou was not obsessed with next generation weapons, so they just looked like an unidentified jumble of metal containers and mechanical contents.

He could only list off their identities because of the plastic plates lined up on the floor like this was a crime scene investigation.

“Hm? Have you recovered enough to be up and about?”

“Misaka.”

The racing swimsuit girl stood at the center of the mountain of weapons.

“You really are wearing a swimsuit, aren’t you?”

“Sh-shut up! I-i-i-it’s not like I’m the only one!!”

She blushed as she used some tools to combat the foundational component that directly attached to her slender back and connected all the different weapons together.

Why does Misaka’s swimsuit bother me more than anyone else’s? wondered Kamijou with a tilt of the head.

It may have been the defensive gap between the sturdy equipment and the swimsuit. That said, the heat would do her in if she covered herself in thick armor during this heat wave, so it was survival of the fittest.

“Anyway, what is that thing?”

"The A.A.A. I don't know where it came from, but I showed it to you once before. This is a version modified for my use. That said, I don't think I've managed to recreate the 'contents' yet. I'm just doing my best to imitate that black box."

"?"

Before? frowned Kamijou.

Meanwhile, she added a name to her explanation.

"Kihara Yuiitsu."

"…"

He finally remembered. Before the heat wave and Elements had covered Academy City, he had fought a scientist by that name. No, he had been utterly defeated at that point. It was only thanks to the interference of a mysterious attack that he had survived.

Had Misaka Mikoto been the one to do that?

And using *this*?

"I heard talk of driving the Elements out of Academy City, but do you know the details of that?"

"Oh, you mean the Crystal Tower."

"Hm?"

"As you can see, I can fly around all I want and I've checked around over a wide area, so I know more about things 'outside' than the others."

Misaka Mikoto wiped sweat from her brow.

"So the city is crawling with those Elements, right? But where do you think they're coming from?"

“How should I know? I don’t even know if they’re living creatures or machines.”

“Yeah, I guess you normally wouldn’t. Anyway, it seems they’re living creatures and not machines.”

“So they’re alive? Then are they hatching from eggs belowground or underwater?”

He had seen Elements swarming out of subway station stairways and culverts below roads, but the thought made his skin crawl. Was the ground below the city filled with mountains of giant eggs?

But Mikoto shook her head.

“No, no. They’re coming from there.”

He had no idea what she meant.

For some reason, she was pointing straight up. And then she continued.

“I’m not joking. I spotted it while out on a night patrol flight. I saw some orange glowing rain. They descend from the sky like shooting stars when no one’s looking.”

“Are you…serious?”

“Very. Although I don’t know if they’re really coming from space or if they’re born on earth, fly up into space, and drop back down again.”

This was getting absurd.

Kamijou’s school had been barricading the doors and windows and they had been traveling between building rooftops to keep away from the Elements crawling on the ground, but the safety that brought had been entirely imaginary. The odds may have been as low as being hit by lightning or a meteor, but it had been possible an Element could fall on top of them while on the roof or inside their barricades. Two dimensional defenses alone were meaningless.

Although that might change with the help of a high-power anti-air defense system like Mikoto wore.

Mikoto herself gave an exasperated sigh.

“It might sound impossible to wipe them out when they fall endlessly from the sky like raindrops, but there is one thing we might be able to do.”

“And that is?”

“Dropping the Elements from space is easier said than done. If their angle of entry into the atmosphere is even slightly off, they’ll be deflected outward or burned up. And it’s even harder to constantly pinpoint just Academy City in western Tokyo out of the entire planet. They would need guidance from the surface.”

“Wait. You mean…?”

“Yes. There’s something in the center of Academy City guiding the countless Elements waiting up in space. That Crystal Tower is intermittently sending an optical signal into the heavens.”

Part 5

They had entered the space of time between early afternoon and the beginning of evening.

Misaka Mikoto and Shokuhou Misaki had gathered in the same dining hall.

And the pointy-haired boy named Kamijou Touma was sitting uncomfortably across a round table from them.

“To get right to the point…”

For sitting next to each other, the two girls did not look very friendly and the blonde racings swimsuit girl looked upset as she rested her head on her hand and opened her mouth to speak.

“You had that much time and you never got further than that in your explanation? Are you *that* bad with words, Misaka-san?”

“Sh-shut up. It took some time to get him up to speed on the more basic information.”

“He’ll just forget if I explain it, so try to do a better job.”

They had a simple reason for being here: Kamijou’s stomach had growled during the explanation in the hangar. Misaka Mikoto had said she would give him something to eat and then dragged him to the dining hall, but there they had run into the blonde girl elegantly sipping on some iced tea.

“Water is so valuable, but you’re making it into tea here?”

“It’s partially the remnants of a safety measure. We know we don’t have to boil it anymore, but we still find ourselves making it into tea.”

Was there any logic to it or not?

“We don’t know how many Crystal Towers there are in Academy City, but since we can’t seem to find something so large, there can’t be many of them. At most, I’d say less than ten. And at the least, there of course might just be the one.”

Racing Swimsuit Misaka Mikoto pushed aside the blonde girl’s coaster and spread out a map on the table. It was a detailed map of District 7 and colorful markers had drawn a large X and a few arrows leading to it.

Meanwhile, the blonde girl scooted her chair over to follow the coaster. It looked like an obedient act at first, but they were sitting at a round table. Moving around its perimeter would take her to the pointy-haired idiot.

“Shokuhou, I’m trying to have a serious discussion here.”

“How selfish can you be? You’re the one that drove me away and left me with no choice but to give up my spot. I’m sorry, Kamijou-san. Things might be cramped at such a small table, but try to put up with it.”

“I’m not sure why you need to move your chair right up against mine! And…”

“And?”

“ ‘Kamijou-san’? Did I tell you my name?”

The blond girl’s eyes widened in surprise at first, but then they narrowed slightly.

“You really are good at tugging at my heartstrings with even the most trivial comment. You haven’t changed at all.”

“???”

Kamijou tilted his head, but then Mikoto interrupted.

“Stop!! Back on topic!!”

“Yes, yes.”

The blonde girl responded instead of Kamijou. She slightly pulled back the shoulder she had been leaning up against his.

Mikoto cleared her throat.

“Okay, how much had I told you?”

“Eh? Oh, um…”

“Are you an incarnation of worldly thoughts!? Is the immediate crisis less important than some pointlessly large bags of fat!? C’mon, try to remember! Take this seriously!!”

“Oh, ohh! You were talking about the Crystal Tower, right?”

“Much better.” Mikoto breathed out through her nose. “No one knows when it got there. In fact, we’ve even started saying it ‘grew there’. But if we take it out, the situation should change dramatically.”

“So…if it’s like an antenna to guide them, will destroying it stop the Elements from coming here?”

Kamijou honestly had trouble understanding how difficult it was to throw a stone from space and have it accurately fall in a specific city. He just assumed it was too difficult to pull off without any practice.

The blonde girl giggled.

“Do you want the actual equations?”

“Shut up. Shove those in front of my face in this god-awful heat and my head really will boil.”

He had no idea how many Elements were waiting “up above”, but reducing their odds of successfully dropping into the city by a factor of a thousand or ten thousand would indeed change things quite a bit.

“I’m a little afraid they’d fall somewhere other than Academy City and cause some damage.”

“If you look at the actual equations…”

“Please just give me the final answer!”

“The atmosphere is incredibly powerful,” simply stated Mikoto. “If they attempt an entry without any guidance from the surface, they’ll either be deflected by the atmosphere or burn up on the way down. People aren’t aware of it, but an unbelievable amount of pebble-sized debris falls toward the earth on a daily basis.”

So if they destroyed the Crystal Tower, they could overcome the current crisis.

They apparently did not know how many there were in all, but they would gain nothing by ignoring the one they knew about.

“It’s just about in the center of District 7, which is about five kilometers north of here. I don’t know if it was lucky or not that it ‘grew’ inside a domed stadium. It looks like it broke through from below.”

“Ugh.”

It did sound more like something that had ‘grown’ than something that had been ‘built’. He could not think of any reason for someone to intentionally place it there.

“They’re only estimates, but we think it’s two hundred meters tall, thirty meters thick at the base, and gradually thinner the higher you get. We don’t know what it’s made of, but it looks just like the Elements from a distance. We might be able to judge its durability based on that.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

Kamijou’s class had been risking their lives against the Elements in their own inept way.

They had thrown bricks from rooftops and dropped bundles of steel beams suspended by ropes. Their attempts would have been enough to crush a normal car and trigger an explosion, but not even that had stopped the three meter Class 1Elements which were the smallest type. Without Imagine Breaker as a joker, they would have been helpless.

Yet this was two hundred meters tall? And thirty meters thick?

It was too much. Crushing it and toppling it were too different things and toppling something might get easier the taller it was, but what could a student do if he was placed in front of a famous radio tower and told to do whatever he could to topple it? Kamijou had trouble imagining a successful scenario.

Yes.

Except for using his right hand.

“Luck might just be on our side,” said Misaka Mikoto. “It might be difficult to utterly destroy something that massive even with my A.A.A. That’s why I’ve been observing it from a distance in the hopes of finding a weak point or a focal point of its weight. But back at the water department, you defeated an Element in one hit, didn’t you? I still don’t really understand it, but you used, um, *a different method from me*. We might be able to skip a few steps with that. All we have to think about is getting you to the base of the Crystal Tower.”

“Y-yeah…”

“…”

That was exactly what Kamijou wanted as well.

It would not solve the heat wave problem, but if he had a chance of wiping out the Elements, he had no reason not to use it. His answer sounded so halfhearted because of the blonde girl who had taken up her position next to Mikoto and across from him.

She silently narrowed her eyes.

She looked like her iced tea had started tasting like some roots from traditional Chinese medicine.

“My school had its hands too full to even think about it, but if the Elements are gone, it might reduce the claustrophobic feeling. Being able to walk along the ground to search for water and food is bound to make a difference. In fact, we wouldn’t have to stay at school. Without the Elements, we might be able to make our base in an underground mall or some other cooler place out of the way of the sunlight.”

He had thought that was a shared understanding throughout Academy City, but Swimsuit Mikoto looked confused.

“Hm? You hadn’t figured it out?”

“?”

“If we defeat the Elements, we might be able to deal with the heat wave too. I mean, surely you didn’t think this was just some abnormal weather.”

He had not seen it all yet.

There was even more of a culture gap between his school and Tokiwadai.

“For one thing, this heat isn’t caused by the sunlight,” said Mikoto.

She snapped her fingers and a small line of purple electricity ran between the fingertips.

“It’s microwaves. A ton of electromagnetic waves are being sent down from space and they’ve essentially turned Academy City into a giant microwave oven.”

He had trouble believing that.

“It was more than just residual heat keeping the temperature up during the night. And in reverse…”

But a moment later, Kamijou began shivering in his swimsuit. The sweaty and boiling hell of 55 degree heat left him and the forgotten December chill mercilessly attacked his bare skin.

“Wah, ah…achoo!!”

“Well, you get the picture. If I use my power to divert the electromagnetic waves, the heat quickly withdraws. It doesn’t work as well everywhere, though, since the asphalt and such have absorbed so much heat.”

As she said that, the abnormal temperature (or was that the proper temperature?) left him and he was thrown back into the scorching heat.

“But if I was constantly diverting my powers to apply that heat-resistant coat, I’d wear myself out in no time. That’s why I put up with the heat and focus my energy on using the A.A.A.”

“Are you serious…?”

Now that he had felt the change for himself, Kamijou had no choice but to accept it.

But he felt like he had seen signs of this here and there.

For example…

“The solar cooker wasn’t working…”

“?”

“And the fluorescent lights at the trash dump…”

“Right. New or broken, fluorescent lights will still emit light if they’re exposed to powerful electromagnetic waves. There were experiments where people threw them in a microwave oven. And this is powerful enough to bring all of Academy City up to nearly 60 degrees. It’s hardly surprising we’re seeing that happening. Although it isn’t that noticeable thanks to the recent change to LED lights.”

“Honestly,” said the blonde girl. “And LED lights emit all that blue light that’s bad for your eyes, so I’d rather they didn’t use them in a place of learning.”

Until now, the heat wave had been a demonic presence wearing away their lives and lifespans.

But the terms “electromagnetic waves” and “microwaves” made Kamijou tremble for a different reason. He did not have a phobia of electromagnetic waves, but he still did not enjoy the thought of all his body’s moisture being constantly vibrated by some outside force.

“The properly shielded hospitals and labs may have actually escaped the heat wave altogether. Of course, the Elements seem to target those cool and dark places first, so that might not be a good thing.”

“So it’s from space again?”

“Right. I can’t figure out why whoever it is would be bombarding us with so many microwaves. For a time, we thought it might be the Elements’ power source, but based on the corpses we’ve collected and opened up, they don’t seem to have any organs to receive that power.”

“Then is it just to make us suffer?”

“Perhaps. The heat wave is outdoors and the Elements are in the cool dark indoors, so it does seem like a nice division of the threat.”

But why were the Elements even attacking Academy City in the first place?

Kamijou could not find an answer to the most basic question.

“Anyway, we really have seen some hope. Your presence here makes a huge difference in the path to the Crystal Tower. We’d appreciate it if you would help.”

“Understood. My school will be at its limit soon and I can’t just sit around eating your food while everyone’s in trouble. If the heat wave and the

Elements come from the same source, we might be able to stop it all by toppling that Crystal Tower. I definitely need to go with you."

"Okay!! Then let's get ready as soon as-…"

Mikoto clenched a fist and lightly punched her own palm, but then…

"Oh, dear, Misaka-san. *You have a nosebleed.*"

"Eh? Ah?"

"You can get excited around a gentleman if you want, but isn't this a little much?"

"Th-that isn't what this is! The heat's getting to me is all!! It's twenty degrees hotter than a bath, so I can't help it! Umm, where's a tissue…?"

"Oh, here, Misaka. Use this."

Mikoto moved her hands around in a panic and finally took the paper napkin Kamijou had picked up from the table. For some reason, she looked away after that, so she may not have wanted to be seen stuffing something into her nose.

(I've seen a lot of dehydration and heatstroke recently, but apparently it can give you a nosebleed too.)

Kamijou was oddly impressed.

Diverting the microwaves for her demonstration may have put a bit of a burden on her. As a Level 0, he had no idea what it was like, but exerting herself may have brought the blood to her head.

As Kamijou circled around the table to look after Mikoto, a whisper reached his ear from the side.

"(Things seem to be progressing smoothly, but you should stay on your guard.)"

“?”

When he looked over in confusion, the girl with a honey sweet aroma said more.

She almost made it sound like she knew the boy better than he did.

“(I mean, misfortune follows you wherever you go, doesn’t it? Shouldn’t you be suspicious when the perfect solution just falls into your lap?)”

Part 6

The temperature was still hellishly hot, but Kamijou felt oddly freed from the pressure that had been burning at his nerves.

According to Mikoto, they had a plan but it would take some time to prepare. He could guess she was talking about that weird machine called the A.A.A., but he was also a little bothered by her nosebleed. Even if it may not have been a real issue if it was simply her overheating.

(Hmm, what was it like at the other school? The teachers were dealing with the people sleeping in the gym, so I don’t really know.)

Roses, lilies, and plenty of other difficult flowers were blooming in the schoolyard flower gardens and a small fountain sprayed water into the air at the center. That circulating water may have been clearer than the life-saving water Kamijou’s school had been so desperate to gather.

He felt like he could scoop it up in his hands and drink it.

In this environment, they could use it freely.

They had enough to spare.

Even under the rules of this (ridiculous) new world, Tokiwadai managed to maintain its high-class position. In a world where water determined everything, this was an asset on the level of an oil field.

What had happened at the previous school?

He hoped Index, Fukiyose, and the rest had acquired the water purification microbe mud, successfully turned the pool water into potable water, and escaped the pressure of that heavy ceiling suspended above them.

As he stared out the window at the schoolyard and thought about that, he heard a girl’s voice behind him.

“Quiiiietly, quiiiietly.”

She was saying that aloud.

“?”

He looked back in confusion and saw an unfamiliar racing swimsuit girl right behind him. When their eyes met, her shoulders gave a jump. Her face quickly grew red, her mouth moved silently, and she made a rapid U-turn.

“I-I-I couldn’t do iiiiit!!”

The mystery swimsuit girl raced down the hallway with incredible speed and vanished around a corner leading to the stairs. She apparently was unfamiliar with the basic rule that well-behaved high-class girls did not run in the hallway.

“What was-…?”

He trailed off.

Someone had snuck up behind him again. And this time he felt a soft finger press against his back.

“Ei, ei.”

He did not have time to turn around.

He heard footsteps taking off at high speed. When he finally did check behind him, he saw a ponytail girl (who of course wore a racing swimsuit) regrouping with a few of her friends in the distance.

“I-I-I did it!! I touched a gentleman for the first time in my life!!”

“I-I never thought you would be the first one to climb the stairway to adulthood, Nanami!”

“M-maybe we need to find the courage too. (Glance, glance) B-but he’s so scary! It’s the same pressure as facing down a lion!!”

Were they afraid of him or playing with him?

Kamijou tilted his head.

“I just don’t get these high-class girls.”

With that exasperated comment he decided to leave that hallway.

However…

“Whisper, whisper. (Is that the rumored gentleman?)”

“Mutter, mutter. (I heard any lady with the courage to overcome a certain trial with a gentleman is given the right to start her own clique.)”

“Murmer, murmer. (I-is that why Misaka-sama and Shokuhou-sama are working so hard!? I-I can’t just sit around. I am the daughter of a company president who supports the futures of 70,000 employees! I must bring glory to the future of the Andou Frozen Foods Group!!)”

Kamijou felt an unpleasant shiver in his spine.

He quickly checked on his surroundings and saw nothing but smiling high-class girls in racing swimsuits. However, the instant he took his eyes off of them, he felt the piercing glares of carnivorous beasts staring at their prey.

(Umm, am I in trouble here?)

A certain piece of trivia came to mind: A strange god of fortune statue at a certain Osaka radio tower was seen as a symbol of good luck, but so many tourists had rubbed the bottom of its feet that the metal statue was worn away more and more every year.

In other words…

(If a living human is treated the same way, would all their skin and flesh be torn away in no time!?)

“Wait!! You there!!”

He jumped straight up when a shrill voice seemed to explode nearby. He used both hands to strike a weird defensive pose and desperately pleaded to their human rationality.

“W-wait, wait! If you’re going to rub me, at least stick to the cheeks! If this is my only option, then I’ll turn myself into one of those pointy triangle chin guys from shoujo manga!!”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

The utterly exasperated voice told him this was not one of the overly-excited beasts(?) of this high-class girl’s school. He peered out between his complexly crossed arms and saw a short middle school girl with her undeveloped body contained in a Tokiwadai racing swimsuit, with brown twintails, with belts around her thighs, and with metal darts or crossbow bolts contained in those belts.

As he slowly spread his arms, the scene gradually came into view.

“Y-your name was Shirai-san, right? A-aren’t you Misaka-hyan’s fwiend and that lehendary spehial-…”

“Why do you look on the verge of tears and why can’t you enunciate properly? Now, excuse me, but could you not bring an unneeded storm to our school!? I am with Judgment, so-…oh, I hate how this swimsuit doesn’t have a sleeve for the armband!! Anyway, I stand on the side of law and order, so I cannot have a troublemaker like you wandering around!”

As she spoke, Shirai Kuroko tugged on Kamijou’s arm and they quickly escaped the carnivorous(?) crowd. She completely ignored the various comments: “That’s Misaka-sama’s right-hand girl for you!” “Do you think she will be the next Ace?” “Isn’t Shirai-san connected to White Spring Holdings which owns all those convenience stores and imported goods supermarkets? I need to check the stock prices!”

“Did I just hear a middle school girl mention stock prices?”

“Let them say what they want. More importantly, over here.”

Shirai dragged him into an odd room. It was slightly larger than a special classroom and was divided into smaller rooms like a box of luxury chocolates. It was more sturdily built than a net café, but it had a similar atmosphere.

Shirai Kuroko looked puzzled.

“Have you never seen a study room before?”

“What!? Y-you mean people actually study outside of the classroom?”

“Y-you don’t even try to hide your lack of culture, do you?”

The twintail swimsuit girl threw Kamijou into one of the small rooms with a single study desk and chair and she shut the door behind her.

He frowned when he heard the click of the lock.

“Um, Shirai-san?”

“What is it? This room is soundproofed, so we can discuss whatever you like.”

“Did you just lock the door? A locked and private soundproofed room in a high-class girl’s school!? L-lewd!!”

“Again with the lack of culture!! Are you at an age where you see everything in an indecent light!?”

She said that, but how could he help it when he was forced into a room where he would be within a meter of a swimsuit girl at all times, even if he pressed his back against the wall? And even if everything was already hot and stuffy thanks to the heat wave, he was having trouble distinguishing the heat of the room from the girl’s body heat.

“Oh, no. I’m feeling dizzy…”

“Water.”

She readily held out a water bottle, but he refused to take it. They had to have used up quite a bit of water just to get him conscious again.

When he did not take the bottle, Shirai placed it on the study desk.

“Just to be clear, I have no desire whatsoever to be anywhere near an ape like you. But leaving you out there could have caused a riot on the level of a year-end sale, so I preemptively put a stop to it.”

“And I’m grateful for that. What is all this? Things have been so weird for me since I got here. Are boys really that rare a sight for you?”

“I suppose this hasn’t been easy for you either. Well, as long as you don’t try to take advantage of your position here.”

The twintail girl raised both hands and waved dismissively.

And since he had someone he could actually speak with, Kamijou decided to ask a question.

“By the way.”

“Yes?”

“I heard some of you were working at…dissecting? Disassembling? Anyway, doing that kind of thing to the Elements.”

“Yes,” confirmed Shirai while sighing and crossing her arms.

Kamijou leaned forward a little.

“So how much do you know about them? Do you know any weak points or anything!? Are they weak to a specific gas or acid? Do they rely most on their sight or is it some other sensory organ? That could really help once we’re out in the city!!”

“Not so close! I really will punch you!!”

“S-sorry.”

“Pant, pant. Honestly, boys are always like this when you give them the slightest opening. Anyway, um? Oh, that’s right. The Elements. It is true some of the girls are carting in the relatively small ones that Onee-sama has taken care of.”

The smallest ones would be the three meter Class 1 ones. However, even they would be too heavy to carry on one’s own. They were much bigger than a large motorcycle.

“However, we don’t know very much. They don’t seem to be using any mechanical parts. They inefficiently copy the structures of living creatures. They are made from a carbon base rather than a metal or silicon. And that’s about it.”

“Carbon?” Kamijou looked puzzled. “Then are those translucent things living creatures?”

“That’s hard to say. When you look at a mannequin made from a carbon material, do you call it a living creature?”

“Well…”

“And besides! The ones doing the so-called dissections are just a pathetic clique that doesn’t want Onee-sama to have all the attention, so they’re desperate to show any results at all. They’re assuming they have some great new discovery and then going over everything to find anything at all they can announce in a newspaper or the online news. If they found a piece of corn caught between an Element’s teeth, they would blow it way out of proportion. It’s all exaggerations, so I wouldn’t trust them or expect much from them.”

“…Is that so?”

This may have sounded like a reaction to the heat wave and Elements, but in a way, this was still somewhat rational. Kamijou’s school had gone full post-apocalyptic, so a lot of them would run into trouble once the world returned to normal.

"Also." Shirai raised her index finger. "Even if you're 'officially' allowed to do what you want here, this is still Tokiwadai Middle School. I will make sure you obey the rules. Yes, to the letter! …I must teach you just how rude it is for you to sit at the same table as Onee-sama!! I have been skipping sleep to patrol the school and maintain peace, so please do not ruin all of my efforts!!"

"Hm?"

"Oh, I can't believe you! That way you make that question sound so natural pisses me off more than anything!! Fine then. As Onee-sama's herald, I, Shirai Kuroko, shall give you a detailed lecture on the wonders of the treasure of mankind known ash Mishaka Migodo…"

Her enunciation rapidly deteriorated.

Her twintailed head wobbled and her swimsuit-covered back bumped into the wall. She then slid down and her small butt landed on the floor.

Even now, she had an elegant way of sitting.

Kamijou Touma frowned but finally caught on.

"Oh, no! Heatstroke!"

Not only was the temperature so dreadfully hot, but their own body heat had increased the room temperature in this locked room. She had also said something about skipping sleep and then she had gotten herself so worked up the blood rushed to her head.

Kamijou grabbed the water bottle from the desk. He had heard it was best to place it somewhere with a major blood vessel, such as the inside of the elbow, the back of the knee, or the armpit, but he doubted this would help much since it was hotter than bathwater. He removed the cap, held the back of the girl's head with his other hand, and titled the water bottle so it would part her small lips, but she did not seem able to swallow it on her own. If he kept pouring, the water would flow out the corners of her lips, down her chin, and onto her swimsuit.

This may have happened for a silly reason, but it was no laughing matter.

It looked like he needed to carry her to the infirmary and have a teacher or health committee member look after her.

Which meant…

“…Carry her on my back?”

Begin simulation!

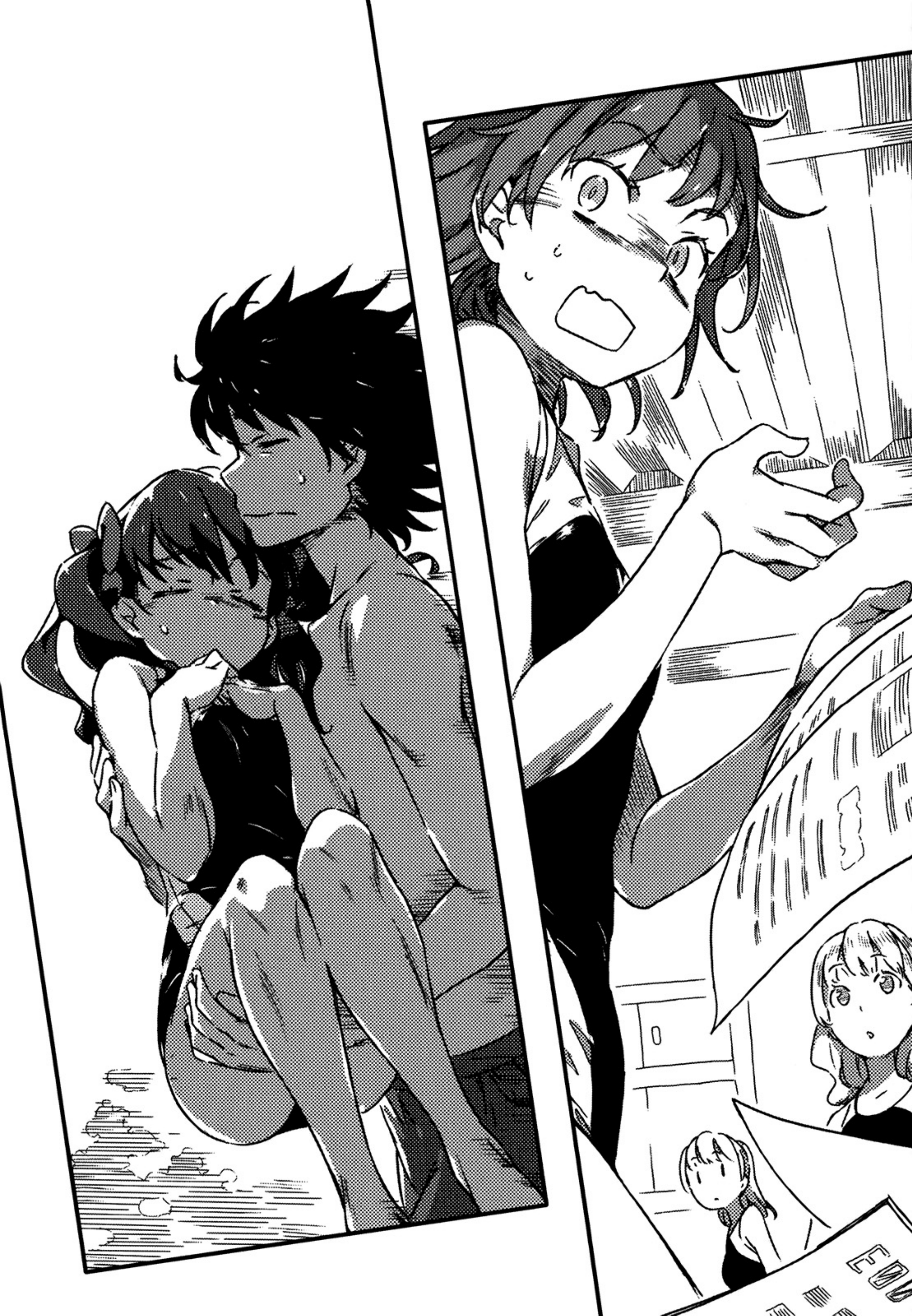
Every option pressed her chest against his back. If she found out, she would kill him.

“…Like a bag of rice?”

It did not seem right to walk around with a swimsuit girl’s butt sticking out like a bazooka at face level.

He tilted his head and found the only acceptable answer.

“…Princess carry?”



However…

A sound like flapping wings came from Misaka Mikoto's feet.

She had dropped the A.A.A. maintenance report she had been holding.

Academy City's #3 Level 5 had seen it!

"Ah, ahhh, ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

Kamijou's entire body jumped as he carried something.

Or rather, someone.

For some reason, he was princess carrying Shirai Kuroko.

"Wh-wh-wh-why are you-…!? Why would you-…!? Why are you-…?"

"She has heatstroke."

"You mean you found my underclassman unable to move or resist and decided to take advantage of it by carrying her off somewhere!? O-oh, no. Why do I feel such a sense of defeat!? Get it together, me!!"

"Hmm." Kamijou thought for a longish moment. "Don't get so upset that I stole your chance to princess carry your underclassman. And didn't I already do this back during that incident with the other Teleporter? Girl's schools sure are scary…"

In a reaction even more reflexive than a sneeze, bluish-white sparks burst from her bangs.

They quickly formed a spear.

"That's not what I felt defeated about!!!!!!"

Part 7

“Take this.”

“Nice serve, Kongou-san.”

Kamijou heard shrill voices from the schoolyard. He glanced out the window and saw girls in racing swimsuits chasing after a ball on the tennis court. They seemed to be playing a doubles game.

(Now this is an incredible sight.)

He had grown used to curling up in a dimly-lit room with barricades over the windows and doors. But which was actually healthier? Keeping up some light exercise and maintaining mental stability may have actually reduced the physical and mental drain.

Of course, they could only do this because those sweating girls did not have to worry about the supply of water they were casually drinking.

The next real development arrived that evening.

As the only boy at the girl’s school, Kamijou stood out wherever he was. He was not too fond of the girls’ mixture of curiosity and fear, so he was killing time at a relatively deserted part of the hallway when Racing Swimsuit Mikoto called out to him.

“Hey, Princess Carry Abductor.”

“I don’t know why I’m being treated like some new generation of criminal, but you already shot five lightning spears at me! I don’t know what you’re so mad about, but can you please just let it go!?”

Kamijou was half in tears, but Mikoto ignored it.

“We’ve finished our discussions and I’ve taken care of all the Elements around the School Garden. It doesn’t give me much of a break, but we’re heading out as soon as the A.A.A.’s maintenance and condition check are complete. We’re headed straight for the Crystal Tower.”

“Meaning?”

“This could all be over tonight. Academy City’s December will once more be the realm of Santa Claus and a white Christmas.”

That was good news.

He had hoped this day would come, but it was all happening so quickly that it actually made him a little scared.

“You get ready too. The two of us will probably be the cornerstone of this mission.”

“Understood.”

Just as she started to leave, Kamijou spoke to her back.

“By the way, are you doing okay?”

“I-I dyon’t mind the princess carry thing!! I dyon’t mind at all!!”

“Hm? What are you talking about? I meant that nosebleed.”

“Oh.”

He had tried to put it gently, but her shoulders jumped a bit.

He had not been all that worried, but that may have been a disgraceful scene that a high-class girl would rather not remember.

“It’s not a problem. I don’t have anything serious like heatstroke or dehydration.”

“I see.”

(…Hm? Then what caused it?)

That was the extent of their conversation. They parted ways for the time being.

She had told him to get ready, but there was not much for him to do. Unlike with the water department, they did not need to bring anything back with them.

When he stepped out onto the schoolyard, Mikoto was wearing her excessive machinery and the two boosters on the back were gently emitting bright bluish-white light.

And she was not alone. Fifty to sixty other girls in identical racing swimsuits were gathered around her.

“Now, let us depart for the Crystal Tower.”

“This will be a group effort. We need to be draw out our fighting spirit.”

“The gentleman will be with us. And the sun is about to go down…heartbeat heartbeat.”

Kamijou only took a bottle of water from them and then looked over to Mikoto.

She had a troubled look of her own.

“Flying you straight to the Crystal Tower was an option, but we have no idea how much of a resistance the Elements will put up if they notice what we’re up to. Just to be safe, it would indeed be best to bring some high firepower espers with us.”

In general, the Elements were confined to the ground and had difficulty with elevated areas, but that was only “in general”. At the water department, Kamijou had seen an Element that could fire an ultra-high pressure water cutter like a laser.

Another group had gathered in addition to the volunteers.

The blonde girl was at the center.

“Misaka-san, with you and the rest of our high firepower group at the Crystal Tower, our defenses back here will be a lot weaker. Don’t you forget that. So don’t waste any time in finishing this and getting back.”

“I know that.”

The blonde girl placed both hands on another girl’s shoulders from behind.

It was the girl with brown twintails.

“Ghhhhhh! Wh-why does that ape have to be the one going with Onee-sama? As her herald, this is when I need to act as her shield. But from what I heard, I was helplessly princess carried in front of her. Oh, what a nightmare…”

“This is all about dividing our forces up effectively. If you left too, we really would be defenseless. Now, if you don’t want me to mess with your head, come over here ☆”

As everything was dyed orange in the twilight, they began their march toward the Crystal Tower.

Misaka Mikoto flew out ahead using the bluish-white boosters. As she shot straight across Academy City, explosive flames blossomed like overlapping flowers on the surface. All of it accurately blasted the translucent and camouflaged Elements to pieces.

Before, travelling five kilometers on a single search for water would have been suicide.

But things were different now. They did not even climb onto the roofs. They were hesitant, but the group of girls set foot on the scorching asphalt and walked along with Kamijou in the lead. They walked down the manmade road that everyone had used without a second thought just a few days before.

“Wow…” muttered Kamijou as he watched Mikoto make a U-turn overhead while waving a giant tank gun a little.

This was on a whole new level. The common knowledge and assumptions that Kamijou’s school had built up no longer applied among these high-class girls. They walked right past the smoking remains of translucent Elements. Those had been six meter Class 2s. Kamijou’s class could not have stood up to them without being prepared for a 50/50 chance of losing someone to defeat them.

The scale of five kilometers seemed to change.

Time no longer seemed to stretch out infinitely as it had during his previous risky journeys. Before, falling to the ground had seemed like the end of the line for them, but now they were walking along it just fine.

The racing swimsuit girls were calmly waving and yelling into the sky.

“Misaka-saaan, you missed some in this back alley!”

“There is no need to bother her with such a small number. How about we deal with them instead?”

“Take this!”

They sounded almost carefree as they produced deafening explosions. As they held up their hands, explosive flames and ice spears filled the entrance to the alley.

They did not bother checking what remained beyond the smoke.

The hunters had become the hunted.

Kamijou felt very glad that these girls had solved their water and food problem on their own.

Fighting them over supplies would have been truly reckless.

If his class had run into them at a supermarket or a drug store, it would have been Kamijou and Aogami Pierce on the receiving end of that. Kamijou had a renewed appreciation of how well Academy City managed all these esper children.

“Oh, I remember this area,” said a girl with wavy brown hair.

“Hm? Did you used to stop here for food after school or something?”

“What!? U-um, um, no, I live at the dorm by the school, so I don’t have many chances to leave the School Garden and, um, um…Awatsuki-saaan!!”

He tried to be conversational, but for some reason the girl blushed and ran away. It seemed out of place given how much firepower they had been demonstrating before.

In her A.A.A. flying machine, Mikoto weakened the bluish-white plasma to slowly descend. She hovered nearby and spoke with some exasperation in her voice.

“How did you end up being the biggest threat around here?”

“I’d like to know that too. It’s just those girls were saying something about remembering this area.”

“Oh…” Mikoto gave an exhausted-sounding sigh for once. “By the end of that first day when the heat wave and Elements appeared, we already had our defenses set up. We had plenty of water and food, so we tried to share some with another school. We chose an elementary school that probably couldn’t build up a foundation on its own.”

“That sounds like a good thing to me. So was that elementary school near here?”

“The thing is…I haven’t told the others because it would affect overall morale, but…”

She placed a hand on her forehead.

“There was a fight over the water and food.”

“…”

“Several schools were fighting it out with weapons and esper powers and everything. Luckily, I noticed pretty early on. I made a quick U-turn and drove them off. I think the elementary school kids were fine. …But that scared them. In the end, no one took the supplies. They all ran off.”

It was not a pleasant story.

“Hey,” asked Kamijou. “How many schools do you think have been isolated?”

“I don’t know. The elementary schools are better protected for security and disaster-prevention, so I think everyone can last a few more days if they realize there are underground supplies there and share that water and food.”

Kamijou’s school was not the only one approaching its limit.

That was another reason they had to destroy the Crystal Tower as soon as possible. Once the countless Elements were gone, the people could freely move about in the heat wave. They would be freed from isolation and they could work together.

(And I’m kind of glad we hadn’t realized the elementary schools had those supplies.)

He did not hide that thought from himself.

He could make the proper judgement now, but could he have done the same thing while surrounded by those barricades and with only darkness in the foreseeable future? And even if he had been able to, could he have stopped the others from boiling over? He was not entirely certain of that.

At first, they had said they were “borrowing” water instead of “hunting” it, but he doubted anyone was calling it that anymore.

Kamijou gulped as he realized just how fine a line he had been walking. But that was what naturally brought words to his lips.

“We need to settle this here.”

“Yes. Let’s end all of this.”

Mikoto used her boosters to fly back up into the sky.

They repeated the same process from there. On the urban battlefield, Mikoto would use the A.A.A. to circle through the sky and bombard any apparent Elements. The girls would use their own esper firepower to blow away any Mikoto missed. They did not even need to approach the violent Elements. They unilaterally annihilated those monsters from a safe distance without giving them a chance to counterattack.

The group of girls had not taken any real damage.

Not even the glass-like shards of the Elements themselves had harmed their soft skin.

“I can see it now,” said a black-haired girl.

He had a feeling she would blush and run away if he responded, so Kamijou silently looked in the direction she was pointing.

Below the purple sky of late evening, the last hints of sunlight glittered off of a giant structure between the buildings. It was indeed a Crystal Tower. It looked like a roughly-cut icicle stabbing upside-down from the earth.

It was so large he nearly lost sight of the proper scale, but it was apparently thirty meters thick and two hundred meters tall, making it about the size of a radio tower. It had also apparently broken through a domed stadium from within. He climbed on top of a nearby pedestrian bridge to gain some height and he indeed saw something like a burst and flattened airbag at the bottom.

No.

Wait.

“What is that?”

A heavy tremor ran through the ground and the scorching metal pedestrian bridge swayed and creaked ominously below him.

He could see the smashed airbag of a domed stadium at the base of the Crystal Tower.

But that was not all.

There was something there. It was coiled around the base of the tower. The reptilian silhouette had long vertical pupils never seen on a mammal. It had four legs and a tail longer than the rest of its body. The second he saw it, Kamijou forgot any of this was real.

The word “dragon” came to mind, but that did not follow the Elements’ rules. It was probably based on a lizard or something, but Kamijou’s mind jumped to a flightless dragon because of its size.

The Element that seemed to embrace the Crystal Tower was about half as long as the tower was tall. The distance may have been messing with his sense of scale, but that giant structure rivalled a radio tower at two hundred meters.

Half of that was one hundred meters.

This was different from running across a crocodile or a bear. Of course it shocked even the proper danger signals from his mind.

Class 1 was 3 meters, Class 2 was 6 meters, Class 3 was 12 meters, and they had assumed Class 4 was the largest at 24 meters.

Then what was this?

Didn’t this skip right past a theoretical Class 5 and reach Class 6!?

“Watch out… Be on your guard!” shouted Kamijou. “This is bad. This isn’t like the others!!”

The giant Element that could be mistaken for a flightless dragon had a will-o’-the-wisp core in the center of its chest. It was blue, the same color as the common octopus he had seen at the water department. The light was so large he could see it clearly from this distance and it pointed to a certain fact.

Water.

An instant later, a dragon-like blast of ultra-high pressure water shot through the sky and struck Misaka Mikoto.

Part 8

“Ah.”

Kamijou’s mind went blank.

He could not tell what was happening in the sky. The site of the collision was enveloped in an explosion of steam, so the details were obscured. What had happened to Misaka Mikoto? Was she still airborne, or had she fallen?

A strange chill lifted his entire stomach.

Yes, he recalled that he was on the “ground”, where the Elements ruled and death was guaranteed.

His instincts told him they were no longer protected by their god of war.

As the far-too-large lizard clung to the side off the Crystal Tower, its eyes wriggled around inhumanly. It was staring down at the raw meat walking defenselessly along the ground.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh hhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

His height from the ground did not matter.

Kamijou grabbed the scorching railing and threw himself from the pedestrian bridge just as the second shot tore across Academy City. The ultra-high pressure water cutter tore through and blew away the metal pedestrian bridge itself.

He somehow managed to land, but his momentum got the better of him and he had to roll along the scorching road before shouting to the girls around him.

“Get inside a building!! We can’t let it see us! We’ll be worn down bit by bit if we do!!”

But the girls did not react much.

They seemed confused and he felt no urgency from them.

“Eh? But…”

“Misaka-sama will take care of the Elements.”

“We don’t need to worry about anything.”

The smooth sailing so far had backfired. They did not understand what it meant to lose to the Elements. After being so perfectly protected over the past few days, they had learned nothing.

And their opponent was not going to wait around.

The giant lizard opened its mouth while clinging to the Crystal Tower.

“Kh…!!!!!!”

He thought his raised stomach was going to turn inside out.

But he managed to get up and step forward. He moved in front of those racing swimsuit girls who had been completely left behind by this twisted reality.

The explosive roar and his right hand just barely overlapped.

An explosive blast scattered across the area, but no one lost a limb. They were still alive. But he could not let his guard down. The common octopus had used its water for more than just direct destruction. The water had been turned to steam by the heated concrete and asphalt. That thick cloud had acted as a smokescreen and sapped people of their strength like a sauna.

The nearby explosion and tremor seemed to finally bring the girls back to “reality”.

The relaxed atmosphere was replaced by one of much rawer fear. Kamijou gave his instructions again before that atmosphere could become confusion or panic.

“Hurry inside!! We can’t stay in its line of sight!!”

The high-class girls frantically began to move.

Kamijou wiped sweat from his brow, forcibly grabbed the hand of a girl sobbing where she had fallen to the ground, and ran inside a nearby multi-tenant building.

It was full of Elements.

Three meter Class 1 spiders and octopuses had crowded into this dark cool spot.

“Get them!!”

On Kamijou’s shout, the sobbing girl he was pulling along by the hand almost reflexively raised her other hand. After several explosive sounds, the small Elements were smashed against the wall behind them. More due to the side effects of her own attack than the Elements, the girl had small rips all across her racing swimsuit.

After a low and heavy rumble from outside, the entire building shook.

Kamijou did not even need to check out the window. “It” had dropped from the Crystal Tower. What for? To hunt down the insolent criminals and to approach enough to see them.

“…”

Like a doll without a skeletal framework, the swimsuit girl pressed her small butt against the floor as she sat back down.

Kamijou thought while using the hand not holding her hand to wipe sweat from his brow.

The girls had extraordinary firepower. They could instantly kill Class 1 Elements on command. But it would take a lot of time to wear down the 100 meter lizard like that. And he did not want to think about how many of them would fall victim to the ultra-high pressure water cutter in that time. In fact, if it just got close, it could knock the entire building over with a tackle. Sacrifices would be unavoidable.

A one-shot kill was the only option.

And since they could not contact Mikoto, there was only one person who could pull it off.

“Hey.”

As the girl sat on the floor and sobbed like a small child, Kamijou placed his hands on her shoulders and crouched down. He made sure to put himself on her eye level.

“You tell the others not to go outside no matter what. I’ll draw that thing away. And it will be easier to guide it if it can only see one target. Understand?”

“B-but, hic, um, what about you…?”

He did not answer.

He pushed lightly on her slender shoulders and used that to push himself up.

He stood up again, grabbed a bundle of plastic ropes, and walked to the emergency staircase door.

(I have no one supporting me. On my own, I’ll have trouble with just the small Elements crawling along the ground. I guess that means I’m confined to the rooftops again.)

He opened the door.

He stepped outside. The metal staircase attached to the outside wall continued up from there. He grabbed one plastic rope and pulled it out. To slide down the metal wires connecting the buildings, he would normally need a pulley made from a small roller skate wheel and a thick S-shaped hook meant to hang heavy equipment in a garage, but he could not be picky now. By wrapping the plastic rope around the wire in an upside down U-shape, he could at least hang down from it.

After climbing to the roof, he saw a section of the ground filled with a cloud of dust.

The giant lizard poked its head out from there. It broke the roadside trees, crushed the remains of abandoned cars, and broke through building walls as it fiercely approached him.

It was between three and four hundred meters away.

From the rooftop, Kamijou's eyes clearly met those of the twisted translucent dragon.

(Not good!!)

Kamijou practically jumped from the building as he caught the metal wire between buildings with the upside down U-shape of his plastic rope. He grimaced at the stench of a burning petroleum product, but he could not stop sliding down the tightrope once he had started.

That was when an explosive roar seemed to tear at his back. It was that ultra-high pressure water attack. He had somehow managed to avoid the first shot and the second shot tore away the roof of the building behind him. The metal railing flew through the air, the water tank's steel supports were torn away, and the metal wire supporting Kamijou's weight lurched ominously.

Would it snap or not?

At the very last second, he let go of the plastic rope.

Just as he collapsed onto the neighboring building, the third shot blasted right through the center of the metal wire. The wire wriggled like a snake and struck him on the back, sending him rolling a few more times along the scorching rooftop.

“Gaaahhh!?”

The unbearable pain elicited a scream.

But that told him the giant lizard was definitely targeting him. He sensed a sticky intent to kill not found in unmanned machines. It would not grow fixated on the building itself or try to dig out the girls inside. Kamijou slowly got up and moved toward the next wire. Staying in one place would only get him shot.

He was about three hundred meters from the giant lizard and less than a kilometer from the Crystal Tower.

He pictured the general lay of the land and shouted to the ruler of the “ground” which was covered in the stench of death.

“Bring it on, monster!! I’ll show you who this city belongs to!!”

He knew it could not understand him, but it still shook its head as if in annoyance and then opened its great maw.

Kamijou was almost blown away again and again as he used the metal wires to move from building to building. Several of the wires and emergency staircases were sliced through on the way, so he could not turn back. Not to mention that the tightropes only worked one way due to the height difference. If there was no wire to the next building, he would be at a dead end, but he continued full speed through the unpredictable labyrinth.

(With that high initial speed, this won’t get harder to dodge the closer I get, so it would be best to continue approaching and get within punching range of this thing. Moving away will only let it wear me down slowly!!)

The Element did not seem interested in predicting what route he would take. If it had done that, it could have destroyed all of the adjacent buildings to isolate him on a single rooftop and then taken its time targeting him there.

They were within 150 meters of each other now.

There were only four or five buildings between them.

(I can do this. I can even see all the metal wires I need! I can take it out when we cross paths!!)

However, he had forgotten a fundamental fact. Setting up two-dimensional barricades and fleeing to the rooftops was not enough to keep Elements away. Even if it was only as likely as being hit by lightning or a meteor, such a tragedy was still possible.

In other words, the Crystal Tower could request for Elements to be dropped from space.

Just as Kamijou thought his victory was assured, a fiercely massive shadow passed over him.

“What?”

He forgot to wrap the plastic rope around the metal wire and stared up instead. He saw an unbelievably large mass. It rivaled the giant lizard that he saw as a flightless dragon.

It was a 100 meter Class 6.

Countless teeth lined the jaws which opened wide to the left and right.

It could likely bite right through not just the rooftop but the entire building he stood on and Kamijou finally realized what it was.

This incarnation of death was a far-too-large…

(Croco…dile…?)

A moment later, a dreadful tremor shook the entirety of Academy City’s District 7.

Part 9

There was nothing he could do.

Faced with this direct hit, the fear may have stopped his heart a few seconds early.

But Kamijou's life did not actually end.

Then what had caused the thunderous noise and shaking?

The answer lay before his eyes.

Several shells and lines of light were released from the ground and were mercilessly thrown right into the massive crocodile's mouth.

If a one hundred meter mass had dropped straight down in freefall, it might have created a large crater in Academy City, but that did not happen. The anti-air bombardment fired from the ground pushed back the giant crocodile, causing it to bounce in empty air. It collapsed into the city on its back, like it had failed in a backflip.

Only one person could have done that.

Kamijou grabbed the metal railing despite the heat it had absorbed and leaned out to look to the ground. He saw someone wrapped in wriggling mass of machines.

"Misaka!! You survived!?"

"You're one to talk! I'm grateful you protected those girls, but that was beyond reckless!!"

They did not have time to complete their conversation.

Kamijou threw himself to the rooftop to hide. The giant water lizard still remained. With an explosive roar, an ultra-high pressure water cutter cut through Academy City’s evening sky just above the rooftop.

He grabbed the plastic rope again, got up, and shouted to Mikoto.

“The croc had a yellow core! It’s probably a Wind one, so be careful!!”

“You’re kidding. It’s still moving after I blew off its upper jaw!?”

A biological crocodile would have lost its brains, but the Elements were only modeled after living creatures. They seemed to keep moving until the glowing core in the center was gone.

There was another low rumble.

It came from a different direction than the water lizard or wind crocodile. Kamijou spotted the source as he slid to another building on a metal wire.

Two more similarly-sized monsters were lifting their heads above the buildings and snapping all of the wires around them.

The one with a red Fire core was an emperor scorpion. The one with a green Earth core was a leaf mantis. This made a total of four and one each of the known core varieties.

(The Crystal Tower really must be important to them!)

Mikoto’s great destructive power arriving so close to the Crystal Tower may have acted as a trigger. If these giant things had been walking around freely before, Kamijou’s school would have been crushed with no way to fight back.

And this did not change what they had to do. Kamijou continued to focus on the Water lizard that would be the easiest to approach. After he touched it with his right hand and it fell apart, he could focus on the other Elements.

“Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

He raised his voice and placed the plastic rope in an upside-down U-shape to reach the final building on a wire that seemed about to snap already. The giant lizard had just collided with the building wall and come to a stop. It was dangerous, but if he jumped down now, he could land on its back!

The dragon pulled its face from the building and swung its head straight up.

It opened its large maw toward Kamijou.

“Kh.”

His throat grew dry, but something else happened a moment later.

With a series of explosive roars, the equally large crocodile was blasted into the air and landed on the giant lizard’s back while giving off black smoke. Needless to say, the crocodile had been thrown there by Tokiwadai Middle School’s Ace.

The lizard’s aim was thrown off, so the ultra-high pressure water tore through the empty evening sky.

Kamijou would not be given a second or third chance at this, so he climbed over the metal railing and jumped down. This was no time to be thinking about looking cool by slamming his fist down as he fell. It was more like he accidentally touched it to support his body when he nearly slipped off.

Nevertheless, it was tremendously effective.

He heard cracks running through the giant lizard and its joints came apart one by one. Its giant body scattered across the road like a doll someone had forgotten to assemble. Even the giant blue will-o’-the-wisp in the center of its chest readily vanished like a candle being blown out.

Then Mikoto shouted up at him from the ground.

“Get down!!”

Countless lasers burned through the air and collided with the crocodile on top of the lizard. She finished it off with a roar from her fortress-attack large-caliber railgun. Rather than causing an explosion, the yellow will-o'-the-wisp in the center of the crocodile's chest was pierced straight through and blown away.

Kamijou descended the translucent remains like a slide and set foot on the scorching ground once more.

Misaka Mikoto was there. A drill, an acoustic cannon, and a few other weapon barrels were bent, so she had likely used them as a shield against the water cutter. Thanks to that, she had survived unharmed.

"Two down, two to go."

"How much can you do, Misaka? Do you think you can fly?"

"I can now that you've silence that anti-air water cannon. Let's go!!"

She ignited her boosters and flew in a straight line again.

Kamijou had no way of keeping up with her speed, so he ran along the asphalt while watching her move ahead and fire down shells and Gatling gun rounds.

Their enemy was a Fire emperor scorpion and an Earth leaf mantis.

Unlike the Water lizard, they did not seem to have any direct striking power, but Mikoto could not relax. If the scorpion covered the ground in a sea of flames, the brutal heat of the updrafts would assault her entire body. If sharp pointed pebbles were part of that, it would become a shower that tore into her soft skin. She was flying in and out at random angles to make sure they could not narrow down their aim.

And while the gigantic Elements were focused on the sky, Kamijou ran along the ground without producing any light or noise. He approached their feet.

If Mikoto was fighting with a direct exchange of blows, then Kamijou was more like a poison stinger.

If they noticed him, they would trample him, but if he completed his approach, he could end this in a single blow.

The emperor scorpion came to a sudden stop.

Kamijou actually needed to run for his life to make sure he was not caught in the landslide of remains as its giant body fell apart at the joints.

The leaf mantis finally seemed to notice the venomous bug creeping along the ground, but it could not swing its scythe. There was only one left now. Misaka Mikoto focused her aim and an even more concentrated line of fire poured down on Academy City. The translucent silhouette was helplessly torn apart and the will-o'-the-wisp in its chest vanished.

All four had been defeated.

But they could not rest easy.

Fully-equipped Misaka Mikoto looked up and raised her voice.

"More are on their way! It's six more of the same size!! At this rate, they'll have a never-ending supply of reinforcements from space!!"

"Then what are we supposed to do!?"

The racing swimsuit girl answered Kamijou's question by forming a gun with her right hand and pointing at the Crystal Tower.

"Blow away the beacon before they finish falling, and they'll mess up their landing. It's all a race against time!!"

"Dammit!!"

Kamijou cursed and started running toward the gigantic landmark.

Mikoto had the greater speed, but she used her boosters to fly straight up instead. She likely wanted to blow away as many of them as she could before they landed and could actually fight. And if she could not make them "bounce" in midair like with the crocodile, their landing could create a massive crater. In fact, it was a bit of a mystery how the original lizard had arrived on the surface.

They were falling from outside the atmosphere, so it took a fair bit of time even after they came into view. Kamijou was seven to eight hundred meters from the Crystal Tower. That was approaching the limit of what he could run at full speed. The threat approaching from above squeezed at his heart, but he kept his legs, his arms, and his entire body moving to continue running.

He was leaning forward nearly to the point of falling as he charged into the domed stadium. Even from outside, he could tell the gate had been blown away. This type of dome was apparently supported by the air instead of pillars, but that internal pressure may have run wild when the Crystal Tower had broken through from within.

He stepped over the glass and twisted metal of the gate and continued on inside.

The stairs down from the stands and the great size of the mound were an annoyance. Even with the crushed roof, there was still a clear area with the height of a tunnel. He ran and ran and ran and ran to reach the base of the eerie Crystal Tower.

He clenched his right fist.

With the sky blocked from view, he could not see the time limit.

He had four meters to go, three meters, two meters, one meter…

And then an Element modeled after a longhorn beetle aimed at him from the side.

It had used its translucent camouflage.

The threat had been nearly invisible to human eyes. As a three meter Class 1, it was nothing compared to the one hundred meter monsters he had defeated with Mikoto, but one of its attacks could still easily take his life.

Kamijou clenched his teeth and glared at the large jaws approaching so close.

“Ah, ahhhh, ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

He shook off all of the fear.

He twisted his body to direct his fist forward and slammed it into the Crystal Tower.

The deadly jaws prepared to clamp down on his fragile torso.

The very instant before they did, a tremendous number of cracks spread from his fist. The great tower had broken through the domed stadium from within, but now it crumbled almost too easily. A fragment larger than a tour bus broke through the cloth canopy and fell on the longhorn beetle. There was no more need to swing his right hand. The Element shrieked as more of its master’s betrayals rained down on top of it.

“Wah, wahh, waaaaaaahhhhhhhhh!!!???”

Kamijou was not safe either.

He initially dove down onto the artificial grass, but he did not feel at all safe with the boulder-like fragments pouring down. Not to mention that the Crystal Tower as a whole was shaking unsteadily.

He could not just get down on the ground. Staying here would get him killed.

The fear of death drove his heart and all of his organs out of control. He sprang to his feet and ran with all his might. He made a beeline for the domed stadium’s exit.

He spotted a few smaller Elements on the way, but he did not have time to fight them.

Translucent remains poured down like rain and crushed the Elements that did not even try to dodge or defend.

At the end of his mad dash, he just about rolled out of the crushed dome just in time for the Crystal Tower to topple over.

That thing was mankind's enemy to the very, very end.

Of all things, the giant's sword swung down toward him even though he had changed direction.

"You've got to be kidding me!! Does my misfortune never end!?"

He desperately threw out all shame and respect. He tripped, rolled, and crawled to move as far to the side as possible. He continued his flight.

He avoided a direct hit.

However, the collapse stirred up an intense cloud of dust and scattered small fragments of broken concrete and asphalt like a thick sandstorm. He frantically got down on the ground, but the repeated blows to his body sent him rolling.

When he came to a stop, he saw a piece of rebar stabbed into the ground.

It was mercilessly embedded in the asphalt just a few short centimeters from his neck.

"Pant…pant…!!!!!!"

He did not feel like he was alive.

Nor could he believe what he had done or what that had accomplished.

He grasped the reality of the situation when he heard the explosive rumbling overhead.

After flying through the orange sky for a while, Mikoto noticed him, weakened the bluish-white light of her boosters, and slowly descended to hover nearby.

"I destroyed three of them in the air. The others were swept away by the atmosphere. Based on the angle, they definitely ended up in the Pacific. Judging by the corpses we've looked at, their specific gravity is pretty high, so they shouldn't float back up in the water."

"A-are you sure that's okay? They aren't going to arrive at Tokyo in a few months like a kaiju movie, are they?"

"I have no way of knowing that, but I'd like to believe the adults are smart enough to check with satellites and send out underwater probes."

Either way, they had no way of finding out immediately from inside Academy City.

They would have to settle the chaos inside the city before they could deal with a problem outside it.

"So did we settle this for the time being?"

"Looks like it."

"It doesn't feel that way at all."

"But no more Elements are showing up. They were sending out tons of their precious hundred meter ones before, but now it's stopped completely."

"…"

Kamijou looked up into the evening sky, but the human eye could not see into space. If he had known in advance the world was going to end up like this, he might have bought himself a telescope.

Racing Swimsuit Mikoto used her gauntlet to wipe the sweat from her brow and smiled.

"We need to focus more on monitoring the sky for a while, but this really might have been the only Crystal Tower. If so, we can assume there will be very few additional reinforcements. If we mop up the Elements on the ground, people can return to the streets.”

It took Kamijou’s brain some time to realize what that truly meant.

His understanding slowly caught up.

If he had let his guard down, the dams of his tear ducts would have burst.

They had made it. The people confined to isolated points around the city had made it. Kamijou’s school, the elementary schools that probably could not build up a foundation for survival on their own, and everyone else were saved. Of course, they could not let their guard down. No one had kept statistics on the total number of Elements, so there was still a chance of a surprise attack after everyone thought they had been mopped up. Still, this was far better than when the Elements had ruled the entire city. This was no different than a redback spider lurking behind a harbor vending machine during the winter. They would not let those monsters have their way. It was the humans’ turn to find them and crush them.

As the whirlpool of information spread explosively through his mind, Kamijou uttered two simple words.

“…Thank goodness.”

“Yes, thank goodness indeed.”

Misaka Mikoto softly placed her armored hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“Let’s regroup with the others and get back to Tokiwadai. Once things have calmed down, I’ll take you to your shelter. Once they know the threat of the Elements is gone, every school should see a drop in internal pressure. That will allow them to regain their humanity.”

“Yes. Yes, that’s right…”

He was unsure if he could believe that. But that hopeless worry may have been the kind of extraneous thought that proved he had escaped the stinging fear of death.

He spoke while walking back the way he had come.

“Well, it seems the heat wave is still with us. This would have been a lot simpler if all of it had been on the Crystal Tower’s orders.”

“Even if things aren’t that convenient, we can overcome this once the flow of people grows more active and we can all work together. The heat wave is caused by an incredible amount of microwaves, so the temperature won’t rise as long as you’re properly shielded. With help from the chemistry and physics teachers, they can gather supplies at discount stores and hardware stores to apply shielding to their shelters. That will gradually build up larger living spaces. And by cutting the heat off from the infirmaries, the collapsed people should recover faster.”

“It sounds too good to be true.”

“And yet that’s exactly what the two of us accomplished.” Mikoto smiled while gently hovering nearby in her machine. “Once I have the time to spare, I’ll turn my focus up toward space. I want to know what’s going on up there. What’s creating the Elements and the microwaves? …I wonder if the equipment and facilities in District 23 survived. If we can breathe life back into that specialized space development equipment, we might be able to reach the source of all this.”

“Come to think of it, we used a mass driver back with the High Priest, didn’t we?”

Kamijou had trouble picturing it, but even if there was a giant UFO mothership or space station up in satellite orbit, they might be able to shoot it down by loading a ton of explosives in a mass driver. But that too would come “later”. It was different from everything “so far” which had been focused on the survival of the children who made up 80% of the city’s population. The space stuff could be handled by the adults who made up the remaining 20%. But if their circumstances conflicted with Kamijou’s, then they might end up clashing.

After thinking that far, Kamijou smiled.

He smiled because he could actually think about things more than 24 hours in the future.

They had entered a new era.

“Let’s get back.”

“Right…”

They easily regrouped with the girls who had remained in the nearby multi-tenant buildings. The glass shattered by the shockwaves had left cuts in the chests and stomachs of their racing swimsuits and some of them had injuries on their fingertips, but that was the only noticeable damage. Kamijou was grateful that the ultra-high pressure water cutter and rubble from collapsed buildings had not hit any of them.

“Fwehhh, Misaka-samaaaa….”

“Ohh, yes, yes. We dealt with the Crystal Tower, so it’ll be okay now. Let’s get back and take a shower, okay? I just hope the power comes back up soon so we don’t have to use a compressed air pump.”

When Kamijou saw Mikoto comforting the sobbing racing swimsuit girls, he could really tell she had become their psychological support as a proper “Onee-sama”.

But then a few of the girls hesitantly spoke to Kamijou himself. They sounded as nervous as before, but…

“U-um…”

“?”

“Thank you very much for, um, protecting us and Misaka-sama!”

When they looked straight at him, he could not decide what to say.

He had been saved more than anyone. He had only delivered the finishing blow with his right hand and it had been these girls who had paved his way there. On his own, he would have been killed while trying to figure out how to even get close to the Crystal Tower.

And that was why he said what he did.

“No, thank you.”

He kept it short so as to not provoke too extreme a reaction, but they started shrieking in excitement as they ran back to the group of girls. He was still having trouble deciding if he had gotten closer to them or farther away.

At any rate, they began their return to Tokiwadai Middle School.

There was no guarantee the danger had passed, but they fortunately did not run into any leftover Elements.

However, they began to speak less and less the closer they got to the School Garden.

Something was not right.

A tense, prickly atmosphere grew. They had toppled the Crystal Tower and the threat of the Elements should have been gone, but the sense of death gradually grew and wrapped around Kamijou, Mikoto, and the others.

“What…is that?” someone asked.

They saw a stain rising into the evening sky. It was a line of black smoke. And it came from the School Garden…no, from Tokiwadai Middle School.

“What is that!?”

One of them uttered a definite scream.

The School Garden was a special zone containing several girls-only schools, so it was surrounded by a thick wall and they had built a barricade over the entrance gate.

However, that barricade had been smashed to pieces like a dump truck had crashed through it. There had been tall watchtowers inside the gate and high firepower espers should have intercepted any Elements that got close. Those watchtowers were nowhere to be seen. Speechless, they climbed through the gaping hole and saw the watchtowers had fallen to the ground.

They ran over when they spotted a girl groaning with her leg caught below a steel beam.

“It hasn’t pierced her leg. She’s just caught. Can we lift this steel beam somehow!?”

“I’ll try to use my A.A.A. Once there’s a gap, you pull her out!”

Mikoto stuck a uselessly bent drill between the steel beam and the ground to forcibly secure the space they needed. Kamijou reached below the girl’s arms and pulled her out.

“Ghhh!”

Her leg was bent at an odd angle, it had grown purple, and it was quite swollen. It was definitely broken.

“I can make a splint from some branches and plastic rope. But there’s nothing I can do about internal bleeding. What do we do!?”

“I’ll gather volunteers from our girls. Not all espers are about destructive power. …More importantly, what in the world happened!?”

The racing swimsuit girls quickly set to work relieving the pain, stopping the blood, disinfecting the wound, removing the pooled blood, and setting the bone. They made quick progress.

Kamijou honestly did not know if his school could have done this well. He could only imagine they would have laid the injured girl down in whatever bed they could find.

“Th-the Elements…”

While they treated her wound, the guard girl forced out a scratchy voice as if desperately holding onto her consciousness.

The Elements.

Had they really attacked the School Garden? Even with all these defenses in place? Kamijou could not picture it. He had to admit the School Garden would have been helpless against that hundred meter lizard, but a sporadic attack by normal-sized Elements should have been easily wiped out by the high firepower girls.

Or so he thought.

However, the injured girl had more to say.

"That person was leading the Elements…"

"That person?" he asked back. "What do you mean? Who is 'that person'!?"

But that was as far as she got. A large tremor ran through the girl's shoulders. Speaking and giving her report must have relaxed her enough to pass out.

"It's okay, it's okay! She has a solid pulse. Let's let her rest."

When another girl said that from the side, Kamijou could not argue the point. Even if someone's esper power was reducing the pain, it would have been cruel to wake her back up with that broken leg.

"But who is 'that person'? And they were leading the Elements?"

Until now, he had thought they were led by the Crystal Tower, giving them an entirely mechanical chain of command. But that did not explain this conversation. The girl would not have referred to something mechanical or inorganic as "that person".

However, Kamijou had found himself viewing the more powerful ones like thinking beings. It was possible there was a more human-like Element out there.

He wanted to believe that.

He could not imagine anything else.

But what if “that person” really was a human like them? That would mean whoever it was had the power to lead and command several Elements. Did that mean they had not overcome the threat of the Elements by destroying the Crystal Tower? Just like people gathered in a crisis, could “that person” be gathering the surviving Elements to make a comeback?

He did not want to think about it.

He did not want to find that was true.

And so he avoided that line of thought. He shut down the workings of his brain. Then he slowly looked over to Misaka Mikoto.

Their greatest power in a racing swimsuit made her decision in a calm voice.

“Let’s head back. We need to find out what happened while we were gone.”

“R-right.”

They left the other girls there. They did not know what dangers lay ahead and they did not know how many were injured. Setting up a first-aid base as a portal would be better than taking everyone with them.

Kamijou and Mikoto continued on alone.

The School Garden’s European-style road was a complete mess. Glass had shattered, walls had crumbled, and stone pavement had been torn up. However, there was an odd aspect to it all. There was sporadic damage, but not the thorough destruction of a carpet bombing. It was like someone had made a somewhat regulated march while holding the reins of unruly wild beasts.

They noticed frightened gazes here and there.

When Kamijou looked over, curtains were pulled over the windows in the partially-destroyed buildings. The people inside did not want anything more to do with what was going on. They had destroyed the Crystal Tower and supposedly freed the city from the Elements, but the atmosphere of fear was spreading once more.

“What happened?”

Everyone refused to respond, so that question remained unanswered.

Mikoto could have flown up into the sky and instantly found the answer, but she did not. She did not increase her altitude at all. She nearly blocked the road as she made progress near the ground. Just like after the hit from the Water lizard, she was clearly worried about a surprise attack. She could instinctually sense “something” that forced her to let go of the previous victorious mood.

Evening was ending and night was beginning.

As everything was wrapped in darkness, Kamijou and Mikoto returned to that school of despair.

They saw Academy City’s prestigious Tokiwadai Middle School once more.

The density of destruction was no comparison to the street. It was so bad that they were hesitant to even step onto the grounds. Some sort of unseen pressure was holding them back.

Then they saw something.

Just as they worked up their resolve and took the first step, they saw a collapsed girl with her back leaning against the half-crumbled wall on the reverse side of the main gate.

She had long blonde hair, a racing swimsuit, a brand-name purse with its thin plastic strap worn diagonally, and a honey sweet aroma.

“Ha…ha ha. They got us.”

“Shokuhou!!”

That panicked cry came from Mikoto who actually knew her name.

But for some reason, it was Kamijou the girl looked up at while leaning against the wall like an unmoving doll.

The blood flowing from her forehead had gotten in her eye, so only the one was open. She must have been scratched by sharp claws because her racing swimsuit had large rips in places.

“Well, leaving my prince with Misaka-san was essentially handing over my stock of miracles, so this was my choice. You don’t need to worry yourself over it…”

“You…”

“Don’t be silly. You don’t need to force yourself to remember right now. You don’t remember anything and you can’t remember anything. Right now, you can even think of that as a strength.”

“What happened here!?”

She was in a bad enough state that he hesitated to grab her shoulders and shake her.

The white mansion had not escaped unharmed. The tennis courts and club buildings were a tragic sight as well. But most important of all was Misaka Mikoto’s hanger. The damage seemed to have been focused there.

“The Crystal Tower was bait…”

The blonde girl spoke in a whisper. No, even that whisper was the result of drawing out all of her remaining strength while her throat was clogged with blood.

“It was meant to identify anyone who could reach it in order to exterminate their base of operations. The Elements arriving from space and the conspicuous Crystal Tower were mere decorations meant to create something as many people as possible would notice… That person was laughing. Laughing while they destroyed everything. Even with the same numbers, a unified whole is entirely different from scattered individuals. With most of our high power group gone, there was nothing that Shirai-san, Kongou-san, and the rest of us could do…”

What? But who was it?

The phrase “that person” had come up again.

“Be careful. That person attacked the base of operations first to cut off the supply line. They haven’t left yet. They’re sure to be targeting you.”

“Who is it?”

It should have been over.

However, their assumptions had been overturned. The Crystal Tower had been a decoy and a trigger. It was because Kamijou and the others had reached it that “that person” had noticed Tokiwadai Middle School’s great power and led a group of Elements to attack it. In that case, who were the Elements working for? Who was “that person” and what did they want?

“Who is ‘that person’!?”

The blonde girl’s eyes widened unnaturally.

She even forced open the bloody one.

“Ah, ah…”

Her dangling right hand started to twitch. She was trying to raise her arm, but it refused to move.

However, her intent got through to Kamijou.

No, he saw it reflected in her widened eyes.

“…!!!???”

Kamijou Touma and Misaka Mikoto turned around in unison.

But it was too late.

The true threat had silently snuck up behind them and it swallowed up the entire world…

Between the Lines 3

Academy City Crisis Management Manual #1109

Hypothetical Destruction Filename “Operation Blackout”

Needless to say, a metropolis with a population above a certain level will tend to be reliant on electricity. For example, New York and London are watched by more than five hundred thousand surveillance cameras, but in a complete blackout, riots will develop in the blink of an eye.

There are a few different levels on which these riots can be triggered: the regional level of sociability, individual financial situations, and the strength of the weapons on hand.

There is a “safety myth” that riots will not break out in Tokyo even during a blackout because the city is relatively financially stable and handguns are banned, but that is nothing more than a prediction calculated from that idea.

Academy City is a part of Tokyo and yet a unique environment, so it would be especially weak to a blackout.

First, students make up 80% of Academy City’s population. Their individual psychologies and regional level of sociability are still developing. To put it another way, they are immature.

And as they are minors, they have almost no income of their own. They may appear affluent due to allowances from their parents and scholarships from their schools, but they subconsciously hold an oppressive complex about having to live on someone else’s yen. This desire for independence can be found to some extent in almost every student, from the lowly Skill Out to the high-class girls.

Then there are the weapons. Needless to say, the children of Academy City have esper powers from Level 0 to Level 5, so they are constantly wielding (or can claim to wield) deadly weapons. And the city's excellent technology would allow them to create handguns with 3D printers, so there is a great possibility for misuse of technology if the adults do not manage it properly.

For the above three reasons, the odds are good that a blackout would trigger a largescale riot despite being in Tokyo and that riot would be extremely dangerous.

The Board of Directors that currently leads Academy City seems to be reducing the risk of a blackout by distributing the power generation over countless wind turbines, but there is a flaw in this solution.

A largescale blackout is not necessarily contingent on the loss of the power generation.

For example, if a nuclear weapon detonated near the atmosphere, a massive electromagnetic pulse would descend on the city and destroy all of its electronics.

Even if sturdy spare power generators are stored deep underground, a blackout is unavoidable if the devices that use the power have been destroyed.

And if a large number of espers take part in the riot, it would be incredibly difficult to quell during a blackout. The adults of Anti-Skill use next generation weapons…that is, everything from their rifles to their unmanned tanks and fighters have been made into high-tech devices, so it is unknown what percentage of our current weaponry would still be usable.

(A different document contains hypothetical combat data concerning Academy City's #3, aka Railgun. Use it as a reference on the vulnerability of next generation weapons containing electronics.)

Also, a complete blackout would affect the management of bacteria and chemicals stored in research facilities. If they were to leak out, Academy City would become a city of death within half a day, without even taking a possible riot into account.

The dangerous specimens kept in cold storage would be most affected by a blackout. For the time being, I have a strict policy of installing secondary freezing systems that use chemical coolants rather than electricity. I also strongly recommend that Anti-Skill use old-fashioned iron sights in addition to their high-tech targeting devices.

Also, cold sleep devices should be given a thermos-like structure and sealed in with chemical coolants such as liquid nitrogen or helium. However, exposing them to room temperature while still sealed will cause an explosion due to the expansion upon vaporization, so be careful. The thermos-like structure requires a plug to allow the vaporized gases to escape.

What matters most is to maintain the "power of the adults" even during an emergency.

I believe the most effective way of doing that is to adopt a combination of high- and low-tech rather than just using the cutting edge.

Academy City Hypothetical Disaster Planning Calculations Director – Kihara Yuiitsu

(The following is handwritten)

Heh heh. I made sure to get it done by the deadline, so make sure to praise me.

Let's get something to eat once you're finished grading it, Sensei.

Chapter 3: Mutual Request for Assistance between Enemies – Double_Enemy.

Part 1

This time. This time he truly did think he was dead.

In fact, he could think of no possible way he could have survived.

And yet…

“Kahah! Ah…!!!???”

Still in his swim shorts, Kamijou woke up to his own coughing pounding at his eardrums. His vision and mind were muddy and he could not tell where he was lying. He desperately turned his head to gather as much visual information as possible, but that only threw the scene out of focus. The wild dance of light filled him with nausea similar to 3D motion sickness. However, that suffering told him he was still alive.

“Wha…ghh…what…gwah!!”

He seemed to lose his balance as he writhed around.

He fell off of whatever he had been lying on. He fell onto a cold floor from waist height. Then another question came to mind. The floor was cold. Was it not being heated by the scorching 55 degree air? No, by the microwaves pouring down from space, if Mikoto was right.

(This is different…)

His eyes finally managed to focus.

He focused on his racing heart and gulped.

(I really am walking on the borderline this time. The slightest thing could push me over the edge and I'd never come back. Was my heart really beating just now?)

The floor was made of cold tiles and he had been lying on a silver stainless steel platform. The room looked like an industrial kitchen, but it had no gas range and instead had several large refrigerators lined up by the wall. Lastly, he noticed the scent of blood and fat. The entire room gave off the stench of raw meat.

Kamijou was briefly reminded of a gloomy execution room from a horror movie, but that was inaccurate.

Those execution rooms were modeled after something and the thick knives and large refrigerators here were the original version of it.

(A meat…processing room?)

A few plastic bags had fallen to the floor. They all had the same logo on them: White Spring Shopping Center.

Kamijou never shopped there unless they were having an especially good sale, but it was a well-known mall in Academy City. It was a lot like a department store and supermarket had fused together, so one could buy anything from food to a wedding ring there.

Of course, Kamijou Touma had not come here on his own.

Something had happened since "then" and someone had carried him to the countertop in the meat processing room of a shopping mall. But who? He had no memories leading to this point. His memories stopped after arriving back at Tokiwadai Middle School. What had happened to Misaka Mikoto and…? There had been someone else there, but he could not remember their name or what they looked like. It was less like the drawer in his mind refused to open and more like his hand could not fit in the gap between the shelf and the wall.

Kamijou had fallen, rolled, groaned, and now tried to get his mind working.

But the answer was given to him.

“Hi, Kamijou Touma. I’m glad to see the love of your right hand is still leading you down an unfortunate path in life.”

He recognized the boy’s voice reaching him from overhead.

It was the boy with the other right hand, World Rejecter.

No, it was the boy whose right hand had been severed by someone and had been stripped of that “qualification”.

It was Kamisato Kakeru.

“You…? Why…!?”

Unable to get up, Kamijou crawled away from the boy who was surprisingly close by.

Meanwhile, Kamisato Kakeru wore a swimsuit he may have acquired from this mall, but he was not sweating at all.

“Why? Because *you were about to get taken out by that person* and I had no choice but to lend a hand. Well, it was Salome and Fran who did all the work, so I’m not saying you need to thank me or anything.”

“…”

Kamisato had used the same phrase: that person.

“That person” was the one who had sacrificed the Crystal Tower to locate their enemy and then led the Elements to attack Tokiwadai Middle School, but this meant “that person” was *not* Kamisato Kakeru.

Kamijou Touma silently stared at Kamisato’s right hand like it disturbed him.

The boy's right hand had been severed, but now he had a hand there like nothing had happened.

However, that hand did not contain World Rejecter. In fact, it was not even a boy's hand. It had a gracefully femininity and slender fingers. Even the manicure mostly remained.

"Oh, this?"

The kind of normal high school boy one could find anywhere casually clenched and unclenched his right hand. That proved he could move the fingers himself. Conversely, a thick wire was roughly stitched around the wrist like the repairs to a stuffed animal.

"I needed something to cover up the wound until I got that goddamn toy back. I collected this so it could double as payback."

"…"

Kamijou had thought he was fairly understanding of organ transplants. If that allowed someone to heal their otherwise incurable disease and walk freely below the sun once more, it was a good thing in his book.

But attaching a "stolen" organ was something else entirely. He could instinctually tell that was a hopeless act.

A certain boy and a certain woman.

Those two lunatics had swapped right hands and were now facing each other while holding up those hands like flags.

That woman had the World Rejecter which had exterminated Magic Gods by the dozen.

Kamisato had a screw loose.

Was it due to being freed from World Rejecter which had been such an infuriating symbol for him?

If this was what he became after that liberation, what exactly was his definition of “normal” or “average”?

“Kihara Yuiitsu,” spat out the boy with a woman’s right hand. “I don’t need to get World Rejecter back. After cutting it off, I don’t care if it gets smashed with a hammer. But I just can’t stand letting her have it.”

“Kihara…” repeated Kamijou.

He felt nauseous, as if an invisible hand were stirring up his brain.

“Kihara Yuiitsu. Yes…that’s right. ‘That person’ was her!!”

It was fragmentary, but his memories linked together.

After receiving a hint from someone, he and Mikoto had turned around. There they had seen a demon leading countless Elements. Just like Kamisato, that woman had swapped her right hand out for someone else’s.

Kamijou shuddered.

The blank in his memories weighed heavily on him.

“What happened after that? Why am I here!? What happened to the girls who were with me!?”

“Don’t ask me everything at once. Let’s do this one at a time. And can you stand on your own? We let you sleep here since it’s the easiest place to shield, but I think I’m about to catch a cold. Can we move elsewhere?”

“…”

His movements were slow and awkward, but Kamijou somehow managed to get on his feet without a helping hand.

He cautiously followed Kamisato out the door and into a giant fresh foods store. The temperature rose significantly, but an icy chill flowed out from the vegetable shelves on the wall that apparently had power. These large stores generally had no windows, so they would grow pitch black even during midday if the power went out. Being able to see in here or in the meat processing room was proof enough that there was power, but Kamijou only now caught on.

In addition to vegetables, the shelves contained meat, fish, and packaged meals. There were no gaps from looting either. It all looked pristine, but Kamisato continued on and spoke without looking back.

“The shopping mall is the standard in zombie movies, but it isn’t actually all that great. There’s so much food that you can’t eat it all. I think the fresh foods are going to go bad soon. After that, the place will probably become a hotbed of disease.”

This place was different yet again from Kamijou’s school where everyone was curled up in the darkness or Tokiwadai where everyone had used their intelligence and skills to provide for the necessities. In this case, they had too much and did not know what to do with it all. They could not eat all the food and it would then rot. The source of their worries was entirely different.

“Well, the stockrooms are full of mineral water which can apparently last over a year at room temperature as long as the caps aren’t removed. Rely on that and the canned, bagged, and freeze-dried foods and we can stay holed up here for a while, but it will seem a lot less appealing once we have less fresh foods to eat.”

Bars of chocolate and boxes of candy were stuck in the gaps between a few vegetables. That was likely to keep them from melting in the heat.

“The temperature safety measure has become something of a problem. There wasn’t a real issue but something wasn’t quite right, so we decided to shut off the gas. Thanks to that, we’ve had to eat a lot of our food rare. Calculations alone just aren’t enough. If you don’t learn on site, you’ll try to strike back and just get your hand bitten.”

“What…?”

“Ha ha! Sorry, I guess my right hand is only a loaner right now.”

“No, what did you mean? You tried to strike back and got your hand bitten!?”

Kamijou had thought “that person”, aka Kihara Yuiitsu, was behind all of this.

By driving people inside with the heat wave and sending the Elements into the dark cool places, she had filled all the gaps to ensure everyone in Academy City suffered. Then she had used the Crystal Tower to lure out the people and forces capable of resisting or fighting back. From there, she would send out a great force to crush them.

Wasn’t that the situation?

How did that mean Kamisato had gotten his hand bitten?

In that case…

“Oh, you might be misunderstanding something. I was thinking of talking about that after settling down somewhere, but whatever.”

Meanwhile, Kamisato Kakeru’s response was calm.

And it was the worst response possible.

“The heat wave and the Elements don’t have the same cause. Kihara Yuiitsu was the one sending out all the Elements, but she has nothing to do with the microwaves. The Elements grow a lot less active in an environment above 42 degrees Celsius. Ellen, our forensics expert, figured that one out, so there’s no doubting it.”

“Ah?”

Kamijou had no idea what Kamisato meant.

And that was why he forgot to stop the other boy from saying more.

“We’re the ones suppressing their movements by covering the city in plenty of microwaves.”

Part 2

“Oh, boss. Did that kid finally wake up?”

That rough girl’s voice came from the indoor food court. The wall was lined with restaurants serving crepes, chazuke, ramen, yakisoba, takoyaki, bowl dishes, burgers, and more, but none of them were actually in business at the moment. A girl with her hair cut into something like fox ears was using one of the kitchens to cook pancakes. She wore a white bikini. Kamijou could not see her whole body with the counter in the way, but she seemed to be wearing a red pareo around her waist. If the gas range was working, it must have run off of a propane tank instead of the city gas. …Although if they could gather the microwaves effectively, they probably would not need any other heat source, just like with a solar cooker.

Or perhaps they were generating power like that. The roof may have been a flower garden of homemade parabolic antennae.

“But anyway, can you do something about Claire? She’s really having a tough time with this heat wave. She’s turning brown all over. Do you think she’s shriveling up? Global warming sure is scary.”

Kamijou looked to the corner of the food court at which the girl pointed her spatula and saw a short girl in a baggy lab coat holding a toy watering can. She wore a frilly two-piece swimsuit below the lab coat and she was pouring water on a glasses girl lying wilted on the floor in a leaf swimsuit.

“F-fugyuhhh… More, more…”

“The others are checking through the home gardening section, so wait just a little longer. I think I saw a TV ad for something like an IV that automatically gives your houseplants water while you’re on vacation, but I don’t remember what it was called…”

In addition to those girls, Kamijou saw something like a giant jellyfish caught in a fishing net. It was a pair of translucent raincoats. The person collapsed on a food court table slowly sat up. It was a brown-skinned girl with her long silver hair gathered on either side of her head like ammonites.

She was Mass Murderer Salome.

She was also Kamisato Kakeru's non-blood related sister.

She spoke sleepily to Kamijou like someone less than pleased to have been woken up.

"…Oh."

"From the looks of you, I guess you remade your body well enough."

Also, the mass murderer's trademark raincoats were open on the front.

For some reason, she wore a white school swimsuit below.

"There's something wrong when wearing a swimsuit is *adding* a layer."

"Shut up. I have my reasons."

"I mean, it's a simplified combat body, so didn't you say it doesn't even have the parts worth hiding?"

"……"

"Hold it, mass murderer. What's that suggestively long silence for? Eh? Wait. Don't tell me that's your serious-mode life-sized body! Does that mean…it has those parts? O-oh, dear! Salome-san, I may not be an expert on girl's swimsuits, but they don't come with a pair of internal breast pockets with buttons, do they? Then what is that pushing out from below…?"

"I said shut up!! And this is a school swimsuit, so why is it showing every little bump and indentation like this!? I thought I could trust Academy City technology!!"

The brown girl quickly lay back down on the table and mainly pressed the thin chest portion against the table in a desperate attempt to hide it from view.

The answer was of course to make it a product of dreams and romance, but Kamijou held his tongue. Nothing good could come of angering a mass murderer.

Since they had just exchanged such a meaningful conversation, Kamijou ended up sitting at the same table. Kamisato had been looking over at a more distant seat, but he gave up on that hope and joined them.

Then the brother spoke to his sister.

“It isn’t a problem with the material. Isn’t that swimsuit just too small? You’re barely squeezing inside that thing.”

“I-I can fit just fine. I’m not forcing it at all. A-are you saying my waist is in real trouble right now, you goddamn stupid Onii-chan!?”

“You’re a self-made cyborg, so you can’t gain or lose weight in the first place. You keep stretching and snapping the shoulder straps or stretching the fabric on your butt, but isn’t that because it’s too tight?”

“What part of your insensitivity do you think is normal, dammit!? And why are those the things you notice!?”

The mass murderer blushed and snapped back at him, but the plain-looking boy waved his hand dismissively to ignore the annoyance.

That part was normal enough, but the boy’s right hand was a woman’s severed hand sewed onto his wrist and he shared a table with a mass murderer. The gloomy power had gone beyond Shakespeare and entered the realm of Dostoyevsky. It all seemed to run into a fundamental question: what was a normal high school boy?

“Okay, can you tell me the most important thing now? What happened to the girls at Tokiwadai? Are they okay!?”

“I’m glad to hear you’re still marching down the harem road, but you’ll have to ask the ones who were actually there. Salome was part of that team.”

“Hm?”

The brown girl had zoned out a bit in the heat, so her head wobbled a little as she spoke.

“We somehow managed to save the gallery there. Although it’d be better to say we missed our chance to take out Kihara Yuiitsu, don’tcha think? When you went to destroy the Crystal Tower, it was obvious she would make her move. We thought it would be easy to get an attack in while she was focused on Tokiwadai, but reality wasn’t so kind.”

“Wait a second…”

Kamijou gulped and stared at the siblings like he could not believe his eyes.

“You knew from the beginning? You knew Misaka and the others would be attacked by Kihara Yuiitsu, but you just let it happen!? What the hell is wrong with you!?”

That was not “saving” them.

If someone provided a gang of robbers with the GPS signal of a cash transportation truck and then dragged the driver out of the smoking truck, that did not count as “saving” them.

Kamijou recalled the girl whose leg had been caught below the steel beam of a toppled watchtower. Her leg had definitely been broken, but she had forced down the pain and tried to get the truth across to Kamijou and the others. To ensure there would be no more victims, she had left that information with them and then passed out. Kamijou felt like her effort, conviction, and earnestness had been rejected.

However, Kamisato was unfazed.

The mass murderer pouted her lips and looked away like a delinquent girl scolded by her parents.

"…Yeah, sorry."

"I'll decide later whether or not to forgive you. And? How did that farce turn out? You didn't wait around until someone had died, did you!?"

"D-don't worry! I'm a mass murderer, so I would know a lot more about death than normal people like you, don'tcha think? Heh heh. When I kill, I make sure to take it seriously and enjoy it to the utmost. I wouldn't half-ass it like breaking a yam while pulling it out of the ground."

"Salome!!"

"Sorry! I'll leave out the jokes, okay!?" She seemed to jump a few centimeters up from her chair. "B-but, but. It really was okay. Kihara Yuiitsu got away, but we smashed all of the Elements she brought with her. It was like she got caught in her own trap. She destroyed the hangar and they've lost the A.A.A. that she was so oddly fixated on, so she probably won't approach Tokiwadai again, don'tcha think? …H-hey, you say something too, Onii-chan. This guy's scaring me today!!"

The brown mass murderer waved her hands around and for some reason began tugging on Kamisato's arm. Swimsuit Kamisato responded by exasperatedly bringing his (woman's) hand to his hair.

"Why are you better at acting like her 'Onii-chan' than I am? Not even I can get Salome to be this obedient. Maybe you could get her to conquer her dislike of bell peppers."

"Leave that nonsense until later. Salome, you have to know who Misaka Mikoto is. What happened to her? I won't let you say you don't know."

"She was really snapping at me. I think she might be half the reason that Kihara Yuiitsu got away. But if she had it in her to launch a bombardment like that, she's gotta be fine, don'tcha think?"

"Salome?"

"Okay, okay!! I won't say anything bad about those high-class girls!! They're all fine! You're scary when it comes to girls other than me. What are you, my brother!?"

The brown girl raised her hands with tears in her eyes.

When Kamijou heard that, the tension building in Kamijou's gut finally relaxed somewhat.

They were alive.

He had not been taken here after being the only survivor dragged from a pile of rubble and corpses. Knowing that was a huge deal.

(But Kamisato's group didn't leave me at Tokiwadai. And Mikoto's A.A.A. should still have been able to fly, but it doesn't seem like she pursued them when they ran off with me.)

The level of damage was still an unknown. They at least had their lives, but Tokiwadai's facilities and equipment may have been destroyed.

Now he was worried both about his own school and Tokiwadai. There was no real causal relationship, but he felt like a god of death or god of poverty. Everywhere he went ended up falling apart.

(No, that isn't it… Everywhere must be near its limit and this is just what I'm seeing. There might be other schools and shelters falling apart right this instant.)

Salome awkwardly looked away and distracted herself by snapping her white school swimsuit's shoulder straps with her thumbs. She was like a small child sulking because her parents would not forgive her no matter how much she apologized. …Kamijou was not aware of it, but did he really have that frightening a look on his face?

He slowly inhaled, exhaled, and started speaking again.

"How much time has passed? To be honest, we thought it would be over with the Crystal Tower. If the heat wave continues any longer, the isolated schools could fall apart."

"It might be hard to tell without any windows, but it's three in the morning. We took you in at about six in the evening, so it's been nine hours. You haven't been sleeping for days on end, so don't worry."

"*Do you still not get it, birdbrain? I'm telling you to turn off the microwaves behind this heat wave you've caused...*"

A silent change came over the atmosphere.

It was the surrounding girls and not Kamisato himself who reacted to Kamijou's low voice. Several gazes turned his way like sharp blades, but he did not take his eyes off of his target. He stared down Kamisato Kakeru.

Kamisato had said it himself.

Kihara Yuiitsu was only behind the Elements and they were causing the heat wave.

That was an unforgivable statement even as a joke. Inside the dimly-lit and barricaded schools, it might have led to a public execution.

"I said I would explain everything, so could you not get all worked up on your own and direct nothing but anger my way?"

"You actually have a legitimate explanation for this, I hope."

"Of course." Kamisato shrugged. "First of all, this heat wave is caused by the microwaves my Fran is sending down on Academy City. She's a self-proclaimed UFO girl. She has an implant in her head, she flies around on a giant balloon, she gathers wireless signals from around the world, and…well, she does a lot. With the feats she can pull off, you can think of it as sending up an entirely handmade space station."

"…"

Kamijou looked down at the exhausted brown girl. Again with this. She was supposedly a handmade cyborg that had replaced her own body with an artificial one using her own techniques completely unconnected to Academy City.

“Wh-what? You’re not going to get anything out of me! I’m not very tasty!”

The mass murderer trembled with her hands on her head like a small cornered animal, so Kamijou sighed and looked back to Kamisato.

“So? Are you saying this Fran person can flip a switch and end this? Well, why don’t you do that!? Are you saying you aren’t aware what’s going on out in the city!?”

“I said Ellen found an effective countermeasure against the Elements, right? Let me ask you this instead: what do you think will happen if we switch it off?”

“What would happen…?”

Kamijou tilted his head.

What was this guy talking about? Ending their heat wave would free 2.3 million suffering people. The conflict over water and food would end. The threat of heatstroke and dehydration would be gone.

Not everyone could move around as actively as Kamijou and his school. Not everyone could find water and food. What was happening to the powerless elementary schools right now? They apparently had more supplies than the middle and high schools, but what if they felt too cornered to realize that?

But the mastermind did not hesitate to give the answer.

“All of Academy City would be overrun by Kihara Yuiitsu’s Elements. Do you really think those crude barricades can keep them out, birdbrain?”

…………………………………………………………………………

…………………………………………………………………………

……………

Kamijou’s mind went blank.

Yes. That was right. It was true that made no sense. While Tokiwadai had methodically constructed a defense system, Kamijou’s school had only moved desks and chairs around to cover the obvious windows and doors. If the Elements had sniffed them out and made a real attack, even the three meter Class 1s could have easily broken through. The city would have been unrecognizable if the hundred meter Class 6s had been free to rampage.

But that had not happened.

For some reason, he and his classmates had survived.

Then he recalled that Elements preferred to hide in cool, dark places. He had assumed that was to attack the shelters while the heat wave drove the people into them, but what if different people were behind the heat wave and Elements? Then it could not be part of a unified plan. That would mean the Elements may have simply been hiding in those cool, dark places to escape the heat.

In other words, it was not a fatal blow, but the heat wave prevented the Elements from moving around too much.

Had the grim reaper of the heat wave been protecting them?

He shook his head. Simply considering that possibility felt like defiling something noble.

He could not believe it and he did not want to believe it.

“If Kihara Yuiitsu’s Elements had not been restricted by the heat wave, they would have had fifty or sixty times the momentum. Academy City would have fallen to them in less than half a day.”

So Kamisato was the one to provide the answers.

Kamijou was stuck in one spot, so the other boy walked ten or twenty steps ahead and spoke cruelly back to him. He turned all of Kamijou and his companions' efforts into a farce.

"There is no mercy in this world. This is her game of tag…no, of hide-and-seek. I am of course her target, but if she can't find me, she only has to make it easier to find me. For example, if her target is hiding in a crowd of people, she just has to clear away those people to accomplish her goal. What's happening in the city? What happened to the children, the elderly, the pregnant women, and the sick? Of course we're worried about that. We're worried, but we still had to do this. If we hadn't done anything, the Elements would have swarmed in and devoured them."

"…"

Kamijou looked to Salome rather than Kamisato.

The former naked raincoat mass murderer and current white school swimsuit raincoat mass murderer (her description was quickly growing incomprehensible) only shrugged.

"My brother isn't bluffing here, don'tcha think? As much as that pisses me off. But Kamijou-chan, your right hand might be the ultimate weapon against the Elements, but it isn't good for fighting groups. If the Elements had swarmed all twenty-three districts at once…now, just how many people do you think you could have saved?"

"Kihara Yuiitsu…is supposedly from Academy City."

Kamijou's voice was trembling…no, he was having difficulty breathing, but he managed to force out the words.

"If she's doing this for the benefit of the adults, would she really go that far? Could she? I mean, if it had all gone well, Academy City would have become a sea of blood and a pile of rubble!"

"Don't ask me," spat out Kamisato. "Besides, she's the abnormal person who chopped off my right hand and attached it to herself. She's willing to go that far for that awful World Rejecter. I don't know how sturdy Academy City's system is…but can they really control a monster like that? Your higher ups might be at their wit's end now that she's escaped her cage."

Were things really that bad?

Was the situation really that out of control?

At first, Kamijou and his classmates had simply thought they needed to outlast it. By securing potable water and avoiding conflict with the others in the same shelter, they could pass the baton and let the adults deal with the rest.

But if Kamisato was right, things were very different.

The adults had failed to do anything. If Kamisato's group had not made a counterattack at the very beginning, Academy City would have become a sea of blood and a pile of rubble. And no matter how long they waited, no one would reach out to save them. The adults were equally dried up and trembling in fear.

They would have to do it themselves.

That was the only way to end this.

That was why Kamisato had made that callous decision. And even after the warning she had given Kamisato before, Salome had chosen to finish off Kihara Yuiitsu as quickly as possible even if it meant some sacrifices. They knew this hell would never end unless someone worked to end it. If they switched off the microwaves, the Elements would swarm out. If they left them on, everyone would eventually collapse from the heat. They had to end this hell before either of those limits arrived.

Kamijou leaned his exhausted body back in the chair and looked up at the ceiling.

He felt dizzy. His assumptions and view of the world had been overturned and replaced again and again over the past few days, so he felt like his mind had been stirred up.

But he still squeezed out a voice.

"…Sorry."

"I wasn't looking for an apology," readily replied Kamisato. "We were lucky that the weakness Ellen discovered was high temperatures. This would have been far less pleasant had it been an acid mist or photochemical smog."

As he spoke, Kamisato tossed a few photos on the table. Kamijou doubted they had been printed from digital camera data. They were likely from an instant camera that did not use any complex electronics.

They pictured some kind of underground space. It looked like a concrete tunnel lined with bare pillars. A track ran along the ground, so it may have been part of the subway tunnels.

The main subject was a three meter Class 1 Element. It resembled a stick-bug that mimicked a tree branch.

There were a few different photos of it.

Photographed along with it (usually while making a peace sign toward the camera) was Ellen with her long black hair and baggy lab coat.

In one, she was blasting it with a handmade flamethrower that resembled a large metal water gun. In one, she was throwing a weaker Molotov cocktail at it. In one, she was pouring an even weaker pot of boiling water on it. In one, she had it surrounded by several kerosene heaters.

Instead of quickly defeating the very first one, she had tested a number of methods, reduced the scale, and discovered the lowest cost needed to keep it from moving.

It was rational but frightening.

This was different from desperately punching an Element. The Tokiwadai girls had carted around the remains of defeated Elements, but this was a step further. It was as bizarre as plucking off a living insect’s legs and wings, one at a time.

“…By the way, when did you notice?”

“Before you did, at the very least.”

In all honestly, Kamijou still did not want to accept that the heat wave that was causing so many people so much suffering was actually protecting everyone’s lives. But this was no time to let that prejudice bind him. They did not have much time. No one had imagined this would continue beyond the Crystal Tower, so whether or not he wanted to accept it, he did not have time to argue the point. Every second and every moment counted, so if they did not resolve this as quickly as possible, the deadline would catch up to them. And that literal deadline would mean the deaths of 2.3 million people.

So accept it.

It might feel like a concrete block as it goes down, but swallow it and accept it.

There was no time to choke. Even spitting it out would be a waste of time.

Kamijou finally looked back down from the ceiling and spoke to the most powerful and most awful siblings.

“What do I need to do to save everyone?”

Part 3

“This should go without saying, but the crux of the issue is Kihara Yuiitsu. However, the problem is that we don’t know where she’s hiding,” replied Kamisato. “So we set our sights on that conspicuous Crystal Tower. It was bait for a counterattack. That’s why it was using a flashing signal in the visible spectrum of light instead of using ultrasonic waves or electromagnetic waves. Anyone who took the bait would be marked by Kihara Yuiitsu. We waited a few days, but the only group that had enough power for an attack but didn’t suspect it was a trap was Tokiwadai Middle School…in other words, the prestigious school that took you in.”

“…”

“Don’t give me that look. They actually did quite well. If Tokiwadai hadn’t made their move, we wouldn’t have been able to locate Kihara Yuiitsu.” Kamisato Kakeru cut even deeper into the issue. “She got away, but just getting her to show up gives us some important clues. What direction did she come from, where did she appear, how long did it take to lose sight of her, which direction did she flee in, and what important facilities are located in that direction? …That will naturally narrow things down to a few candidates. More importantly, the Elements are like chess pieces to her. She’ll have surrounded herself in those pieces so she, the king, won’t be taken. We don’t need to stop thinking just because we’re up against a crazy woman. We just have to choose the most likely path. Kihara Yuiitsu will be hiding in the most comfortable location along that path.”

“And where is that? We don’t have time.”

“The strongest, sturdiest, surest, and safest spot,” said Kamisato in a singsong voice before giving the answer. “Academy City District 7’s Windowless Building. Directly below that seems most suspicious.”

The Windowless Building.

Directly below it would mean an underground space.

Kamijou had trouble imagining it. It was rumored that the Windowless Building could survive a nuclear blast and a hole had been opened in the wall when they had rescued the immortal girl named Fräulein Kreutune, but that had been an aboveground wall and it had not extended underground. And he doubted the same trick would work a second or third time.

"If that's true, how do we get in? We might not even be able to get close."

"That's why we're still stuck here, but Kihara Yuiitsu has been going in and out. And with all those giant Elements too. There must be a way. Well, unless it's a completely sealed space and she's using a teleportation esper."

"Then are we waiting around until we have the answer? Time is on her side. Wait it out and we'll be the ones to dry up!"

"I know that of course. And Kihara Yuiitsu must know it's her greatest advantage." Kamisato sighed. "Luckily, she hasn't grown too full of herself yet. That means she's still watching to see what others do. Otherwise she wouldn't have set up the Crystal Tower trap and watched to see who would show up. Despite her great advantage, she can't forget the possibility of defeat…no, fear. She isn't conceited. Even if she suddenly earned ten billion yen, she's the kind of person who would continue buying the same tamago-kake gohan she always had. In a way, that's frightening, but it gives us an opening."

"Meaning?"

"If we don't know how to open the door, we just have to get her to open it for us. The fear of death and the possibility of defeat. We just need 'something' that hints at those things and she won't be able to stay put. …And if she's going to flee, she needs to open the door from the inside, right? We're leaving in less than an hour. I don't want to wait around for someone else to solve this, so you get ready too."

Part 4

They planned to leave at four in the morning.

That was before dawn and the darkness-loving Elements would be more active, but they needed to get started as early as possible and their target was Kihara Yuiitsu rather than the Elements. They did not know if she had a standard cycle of sleeping at night and waking up in the morning, but an early morning attack was apparently the standard(?) for an attack.

That meant they had a bit of time to kill. Kamijou could not decide whether he wanted to catch a quick nap or loosen up his body with some stretches.

But….

“Now that I look at it, there really are a lot of them,” said Swim Trunks Kamijou in the large shopping mall.

He could hear shrill voices speaking here and here.

“Ehh? Didn’t Luca just go to take out the trash?”

“Again! That wasn’t trash; it was an old magazine issue which is a valuable resource!!”

“Maya, what is it you’re so obsessed with even after dying and turning into a ghost? A manga one-shot?”

“One of the joys in life is mocking the old failure of a self-proclaimed fashion leader who so confidently announced a completely bogus diet!! The online articles were erased almost immediately, so this paper medium is a valuable resource. So Luca!! What did you do with my treasure! Don’t rob me of the smug joy of thinking, ‘Heh heh heh. It doesn’t matter how knowledgeable you try to act because I know the truth!!’ ”

There were no customers and no employees, yet the mall did not seem at all empty. It was the middle of the night, yet the stillness of sleep had not settled in. There was a total of about one hundred girls. Tokiwadai Middle School had had around two hundred people, so about half a school was following that boy. This was not the same as the number next to a SNS comments section. When that many people gathered in one place, they created a significant pressure.

This was Kamisato Kakeru’s world.

These were the bright colors he had seen.

The shopping mall’s food shops, boutiques, CD shops, and everything else had become a children’s playground. Several girls were riding a push-wagon meant to transport materials, others were sitting on the stopped escalator’s railing and sliding down on their butts, and more had dragged a kiddie pool out into the walkway. Kamijou felt like he had wandered into an American comedy film.

In the middle of the walkway, he suddenly looked up at the ceiling.

“Oh, a spot cooler.”

A thick duct-like pipe branched off and opened up toward him. Instead of cooling the entire room, the device blew cool air on just the one spot. They were common in mines, in factories, and more recently in ramen shop kitchens.

The heat wave was supposedly caused by microwaves, so such a device would be possible if a few conditions were met. Either way, he had felt like he was practically swimming through a hellish heat approaching 60 degrees, so he had trouble leaving this manmade chilly wind.

But…

“Nn!”

He heard a voice of protest from the side.

He looked over and saw a small bob-cut girl sitting with her small butt in a plastic kiddy pool and her arms and legs sticking out of the pool. The front of her pink hoodie was unzipped and she wore a bikini below. The rabbit design on the left breast maintained its shape perfectly due to the depressing lack of volume below. Sitting outside the pool was a gray backpack stuffed full of something and with strange antennae sticking out from it.

Her hooded head had rabbit-ear antennae on it and she seemed to have been enjoying the spot cooler before he arrived.

He quickly moved out of the way.

“Sorry, sorry.”

“As long as you understand.”

She still puffed out her soft-looking cheeks, but the rabbit-ear antennae girl scooted her butt forward, leaned back, and placed her head in the water. She blew bubbles with her mouth, so it looked like a small child playing with a straw in a glass of soda.

Kamijou sighed and started to leave…but then he noticed something.

A full backpack had been placed outside the kiddy pool to keep it from getting wet.

He had noticed the small nametag on its side.

He could not quite tell if it was a family name or a personal name because it was nothing more than a few round hiragana characters.

However, they said “Fran”.

“…Fran?”

“Hm?”

“Are you the Fran that Kamisato was talking about? You’re the one with the station sending out all the microwaves causing the heat wave!?"

The pink hoodie and bikini girl did not give a clear yes or no.

In fact, she started fidgeting with the carrot-shaped stoppers on the end of the hoodie's strings, blushed a little, and looked away while apparently focused on something else entirely.

"O-oh, dear. Kamisato-chan was talking about me? Does he think what I'm doing here is important? Heh heh heh."

"I wasn't talking about that and I don't care about your creepy feelings for each other! Please don't tell me you were fidgeting like this when that bastard Kamisato asked you to cause this whole mess!"

US
B
ふらん

She did not respond.

She blew more bubbles in the water like a kid playing with her soda through a straw.

He felt like getting a straight answer out of her would be frightening enough.

That bastard may seriously have triggered the end of the world and he did it by asking a girl for a favor.

Meanwhile, the small rabbit-ear antennae girl scooted her butt again to lift her mouth back above the water. She also kicked her bare feet that stuck out of the pool.

“What do you want?”

“Oh, um…”

Come to think of it, what was I planning to do after confirming it was her? he asked himself. For better or for worse, it had felt like running across someone famous, so he had asked without thinking.

This rabbit-ear antenna girl was definitely the one behind the heat wave causing Index and Fukiyose so much suffering, but according to Kamisato, Academy City would be overrun by countless Elements without Fran’s wide-range microwave attack holding them back.

The Elements had caused Kamijou plenty of trouble.

And he understood that it was not a lack of preparation keeping him from defeating them. He did not know if he could win without the heat wave even if he had all the time in the world to prepare beforehand. And he could not singlehandedly deal with multiple simultaneous tragedies occurring around the city. No matter how hard he struggled, there was a limit to what a single body could do.

He felt she had saved his life.

But he also found himself unable to unconditionally thank her.

It was a complex feeling. It felt like running across an organ dealer. There were definitely lives they had saved, but when you took a step back, the evil side of it all stood out more.

“Hmph.”

Either Fran had not liked the look in Kamijou’s eyes or she had simply grown sick of waiting because she scooted her butt to lean her head back against the plastic pool once more. Then she blew more bubbles.

The rabbit-ear antennae girl spoke in a sulky voice.

“I don’t care. The only things that matters is that Kamisato-chan understands.”

Were those words another symbol of Kamisato Kakeru’s world?

Even with a hundred people gathered around him, the interpersonal relationships were simple. The girls were not all interconnected in a complex spider web. All the lines connected straight to Kamisato in the center and all other connections were shallow. It may have been simpler to call it a gathering of strangers who had a friend in common.

“But since she felt the need to say it…”

“…”

“She must still be a coward who’s worried what the others think-…cold! Don’t splash me with your feet! And does constant exposure to that spot cooler really get the water this cold, you damn bourgeoisie!?”

“Nn, nn!!”

Cold water was the greatest treasure at the moment, but he discovered it was toxic to a body so accustomed to the boiling heat. While it was only an unconfirmed urban legend, Kamijou had heard that someone could die of shock if you shoved ice cream onto their bare chest while they were blindfolded. The odd beating of his heart convinced him that the urban legend may not have been entirely wrong.

The spiky-haired boy tried to escape, but then his foot slid to the side.

And of course, this was not due to being well-versed in kendo foot-sliding techniques.

He had slipped on the water Fran was splashing at him.

His field of vision spun around.

By the time he realized what was happening, it was too late to stop it.

Kamijou Touma dove face-first into the kiddie pool.

And that sent him right into the small rabbit-ear antennae girl who was nearly sprawled out in the pool.

Part 5

Rust-proofing spray, a sock stuffed with pachinko balls, a disaster strobe light, a crowbar, a utility knife, instant glue, plastic sheets, synthetic fiber rope, and canned food.

“You sure are packing a lot.”

Kamijou Touma spoke to Kamisato who was filling a large tote bag with products from the shelves. Kamisato replied with a skeptical look.

“What about you? Are you heading out there entirely unarmed?”

“I’m afraid I’d stab myself in the leg or something if I brought a weird weapon with me.”

“Is that so? Well, you don’t have as strict a category of allies like I do. You even throw your enemies into that category, so I suppose anything that can do real damage would only be in the way for you.”

With that simple comment, Kamisato lifted the tote bag in one hand. Just watching was enough to tell how heavy it was.

“Are you sure you should be holding that?”

“Yeah. The stitches may not be pretty, but Claire always does her job. It’s attached pretty well.”

Kamisato lightly twisted the wrist that held the tote bag.

“And even if the hand does fall off, *it isn’t mine.* Kihara Yuiitsu stole my World Rejecter and is using it for herself, so I might as well make her pay a rental fee.”

That right hand was forcibly stitched on like a small child trying to repair the burst belly of their stuffed animal.

The quality of the skin was clearly different, it was slender, and a bright manicure covered the nails.

"…I met a talking dog."

"?"

Kamijou did not know what to make of that sudden comment.

Kamisato did not seem to really care if Kamijou understood. Speaking the words was all that mattered to him.

"It was after our previous fight. This weird dog was surrounded by a bunch of weapons called the A.A.A.…I think it stood for the Anti Art Attachment. I beat him up of course, but he would have killed me otherwise. That's probably what caused this. Everyone has their own values and that changes what they weigh against the world on the scales. But I have no obligation to play along. If she's going to place the world on one side of the scales, then I'll do the same."

"Hey." Kamijou asked a sudden question. "What do you plan to do after you settle things with Kihara Yuiitsu? …Um, about that right hand, I mean."

Before, he had loathed the World Rejecter. He might want to prevent Kihara Yuiitsu from misusing it, but then what? Would he reattach his right hand and keep that great power with him, or would he continue living with Kihara Yuiitsu's right hand?

"Let me ask you something instead. You've lived with a special right hand longer than I have. …So do you know where that right hand came from and where it will go next?"

"…Where it will go next?"

"To be blunt, I have no more interest in World Rejecter. If it disappears with Kihara Yuiitsu when she dies, that's fine by me."

That normal high school boy uttered a dangerous word.

Or perhaps it was normal for a teenage boy to talk about death and killing. Perhaps Kamijou was the odd one out for feeling the proper weight behind the words.

"But apparently these things move from person to person and object to object. In that case, eliminating Kihara Yuiitsu won't end this. As you know, World Rejecter's power is great enough to call evil. I can't create a situation where it could pass on to anyone in the world. Nothing good would come of having it fall in the hands of someone even crazier than Kihara Yuiitsu and it would cause plenty of damage in the hands of some thoughtless idiot who just used it whenever he felt like it. Yes," he muttered. "Just like when I used it."

"…"

Kamijou could find nothing to say for a while.

The next in line. After he died. …He had honestly never really thought about it before. Although that may have been normal for a teenage boy. But it was definitely an issue he could not afford to ignore. His Imagine Breaker was not as directly destructive as Kamisato's World Rejecter, but it could still be used to greatly influence both the science side and the magic side. It could destroy some hidden seal somewhere or something like that. It may have "only" caused as much damage as it did because it had ended up with a Japanese high school boy. But what if its next owner was a wicked person with a devilish intellect? Had he ever really thought about whether or not he would be responsible in some way for whatever might happen?

"I want to erase that power," clearly stated Kamisato Kakeru. "I thought you might know something helpful, but that look on your face says otherwise. In that case, I guess I'll be stuck traveling the world with that right hand for the time being."

"You…"

"Of course, that's only if I'm not blown away the instant I touch that right hand now that I've strayed from my wholehearted focus on revenge. …I hope this attempt to fully reject the power given to me by those Magic Gods counts as focusing on my revenge, but I can't peer into my own heart."

Kamijou was not sure what to think.

Kamisato Kakeru seemed unemotional, but it was more that he did not convey his emotions much because he was not the type to let them show in his voice. But was he really still entirely focused on taking revenge on the Magic Gods? If Kamijou showed him 15cm Othinus, would the boy want to crush her in his fist? Kamijou could not say yes or no with any confidence.

And Kamisato did not seem to want a clear answer from someone else.

"It's time. Let's get started."

"S-sure."

Kamisato held the heavy-looking tote bag at his side and walked down the mall walkway with Kamijou.

"I'd always thought it was that right hand causing so many people to gather around me."

"…"

"But that wasn't it. I finally understood once I lost it. Those girls proved you right. Losing that special right hand didn't destroy my world."

"Kamisato?"

"I'm grateful. Although I'm not sure whether this happened too soon or too late."

They set out at dawn.

A small girl wearing a white bikini below a pink hoodie (which could likely function as a sleeping bag) stood on the roof of the parking garage located directly above the shopping mall. She grabbed a giant UFO-like balloon, shook the rabbit-ear antennae on her hood, and pushed off the ground with her toes so her small butt and the round pod attached to it floated up into the air.

Her voice from the heavens could apparently reach Kamisato even through the powerful microwaves.

“Let’s stick to the plan,” he said.

“Right. Stick to the plan.”

Kamijou watched the rabbit-ear antennae bob-cut girl float past in her hoodie, bikini, and backpack filed with antennae. Then he looked back to the ground. They were outside the shopping mall and a few dozen…no, around a hundred girls were gathered around Kamisato.

“Fran will observe from above,” began Kamisato. “We need to rattle Kihara Yuiitsu as much as we can. We need to make her think she can’t just keep hiding safely in her shelter as planned. So let’s make as much of a show as possible.”

“There’s nothing we can do if she gets away.”

“I know that. We can’t let her use time as a weapon any longer.”

They began their march in the burning light of dawn.

The Windowless Building was in southern District 7, just like Kamijou’s school and dorm. He recognized the streets along the way. With the hundred members of the Kamisato Faction filling the sidewalk and road alike, he felt like he had wandered into another world. The mismatch between the scenery and the people made Kamijou feel dizzy.

They saw no sign of Elements walking around.

They did not even see any three meter Class 1s, so it almost felt like the Crystal Tower had ended everything.

When Kamijou heard some movement and looked over, he saw a middle school boy and girl hesitantly peeking out from an alley. The ground should have meant instant death with the Elements around, so the pair had likely come out to see why there was no sign of those monsters.

Peace seemed to have returned, but nothing was really over.

Kihara Yuiitsu could send out a swarm of Elements at any time. If she chose someone as a target, they would be overrun even in a school or shelter. Not even the high level espers of Tokiwadai and the School Garden had been able to fight it.

Kamijou could not let her do that again.

That meant he could not allow everything to return to normal. They had to prevent Kihara Yuiitsu from having her fun. They had to make sure she panicked and dug her own grave. Kamijou could not even imagine it after being manipulated so much himself, but that result was within reach now.

Kamisato Kakeru had lost World Rejecter, but he still had one hundred jokers.

“This is as good a place as any to start.”

“?”

Kamijou frowned at Kamisato’s whispered words.

The boy’s hand suddenly moved.

It was Kihara Yuiitsu’s slender hand forcibly sewn onto his right wrist. He quickly swung it horizontally and then he held a glittering object smaller than a grain of rice between the index and middle fingers.

“Should I praise her attention to detail or should I just call it a cheap trick?”

“What…is that?”

Kamijou doubted his eyes.

It was not that he did not know what it was. His doubt came from knowing exactly what it was.

Yes, he knew what Kamisato held between his…or rather, Yuiitsu's fingertips.

"How did Kihara Yuiitsu get information on the outside world while hiding underground in the dark? At the very least, she needed to observe the Crystal Tower to know who reached it. That was a bit of a mystery. Fran's powerful microwaves would easily destroy any normal electronics and act as powerful jamming for any wireless signals. A shielded room would help, but it would still be hard to communicate with the outside world."

"Huh…?"

"And it wouldn't make sense for her to be walking freely around the city herself. She's the king in chess. She might be convenient, but she can't make an attack on the enemy pieces on her own. If she could, she wouldn't need her safe underground hideout in the first place. Plus, her eyes and ears can't cover all of Academy City."

"So these acted as her eyes and ears…?"

Kamijou gulped as he looked back at what Kamisato had caught.

The rice-sized object had small wings and six legs.

"It's the smallest type of Element. Using your numbering system, maybe we should call it Class 0."

"Those things are crawling all over the city…?"

"They might have been on the inside of all the chairs and desks you thought were keeping you so safe."

"…"

“But it’s strange. Even if these grains of rice are gathering data through their five senses, how are they getting it back to Kihara Yuiitsu? Fran’s microwaves would render any wireless signal unreadable.”

Kamisato sounded both delighted and cruel.

“Do they simply return home after gathering a set amount of data? Or do they dance or touch each other with their feelers like ants or bees to relay the information back like a game of telephone?”

After a quiet sound, Kamisato let go to reveal a small, sharp stinger jutting out from the back of the rice grain, but he did not seem to care. He flicked the rice grain away, reached out his hand again, and grabbed a different one.

This time, he grabbed the wings from the back and made sure it could not prick him with the stinger.

“Or…no, do they speak with the wings themselves like a cicada? If so, the transmission medium must be ultrasonic waves. …That wouldn’t be disturbed by the microwaves, but it wouldn’t travel very far.”

Kamisato stared at the rice grain struggling between his fingers and then he looked around to his surroundings.

His eyes stopped on a position slightly above the ground. A three-bladed wind turbine was located not far away. There was “something” at the very top, but anyone not looking for it would have easily overlooked it. It was something like a translucent icicle as long as two pens. It resembled a miniature Crystal Tower and it also resembled the cellphone relay antennae seen around the city.

“You’re not wrong,” replied Kamisato when Kamijou mentioned his impression of it. “The rice grains hiding everywhere gather the surrounding information and then oscillate to transmit it with ultrasonic waves inaudible to human ears. The base station for an entire area likely picks up those signals and sends all that back to the big boss. In that case, we need to take a look at the base of the antenna. If they have a countermeasure against the microwaves and it isn’t ultrasonic waves…well, my money’s on a wire. By building an underground wired network of Element nerves, they can guide all that information right back to Yuiitsu's hideout. And there might even be some holes in the walls or a more fragile area due to erosion from the nerve-…"

He trailed off before he could finish.

A giant Element had appeared to block their path.

At around one hundred meters, it was a Class 6.

It placed its large body before them like a translucent wall and it had a plesiosaur-like silhouette. Kamijou lacked the knowledge to tell him what this was.

"What!? They can be dinosaurs too!?"

"Of course not. This is a Eupithecia, a type of inchworm from Hawaii. In other words, it's a moth larva. They're originally less than five centimeters, but I think I read it takes them less than 0.1 seconds to extend what you saw as a 'neck' to catch their prey. Let its size fool you and you'll have your head taken off by that killer crane."

"You're kidding. I went to Hawaii, but…oh, hell. All I can remember is that crazy bearded president!"

In addition to the long "neck", a will-o'-the-wisp flickered in the body left almost forgotten on the ground. It was red, so this was a Fire Element.

At that size, it could turn the ground into utter pandemonium just by breathing fire from overhead. It would perhaps be something like a fire engine spraying gasoline instead of water.

But Kamisato was unfazed.

The kind of normal high school boy one could find anywhere even sighed.

"No matter how big you make it, did you really think you could win by repeating yourself?”

That was all.

He did not even snap his fingers.

Several explosions of noise sounded as if the air had burst around Kamijou. By the time he realized it was the sound of the surrounding girls kicking off the ground, the fierce and unilateral attack had begun.

Misaka Mikoto had used altitude and distance to fire down on the enemy from the safety of the sky like a bomber or a gunship, but the girls of the Kamisato Faction were the exact opposite.

They were more like attack fighters approaching the enemy aircraft. No, they may have been more like missiles tearing through the sky after being released from the fighter’s main wings. They had overwhelming speed and mobility. One was a bikini girl in a pirate hat. One was a girl in a suit of armor who wielded several swords, spears, and axes. One was a mass murderer in a white school swimsuit and double raincoats. They kicked off the ground, jumped over guardrails, and even used building walls and wind turbine pillars for footing as they charged toward the plesiosaur-like monster with sharp curveball-like movements.

Of course, the enemy fought back.

Its claws and beak gave a roar as it scattered flames as sticky as heavy oil.

But none of it hit. Instead of keeping their distance or flying into the sky, the girls moved as close to the monster as they could, prevented it from moving, and cut off the carnivorous inchworm’s view to create blind spots. The girls sometimes slipped between its legs, circled behind it, ran up on top of it, and passed blade after blade through it.

To a hundred meter Element, a blade wielded by a human was nothing more than a toothpick.

But definite cracks formed. And they spread and grew.

By some twist of physics, the giant form fell apart even though they used no poison, electric currents, or bloodsucking. They used brute strength to defeat a monster over fifty times their size. It seemed to entirely ignore the rules of nature.

As the translucent remains audibly crumbled and the background shimmered from the remaining flames, only the many girls remained standing.

They tugged at the butts of their swimsuits or snapped the shoulder straps with their fingers. The gap between that very human behavior and the gruesome result made Kamijou feel faint.

"Each and every one of them has a world of her own. Kihara Yuiitsu, no matter how many tricks you have up your sleeve, they will not lose until you have played every last one of your cards, including yourself."

It was simply overwhelming.

It was almost too perfect.

And a moment later, several dozen similarly-sized Elements appeared around Salome and the others.

They were made of translucent materials and excelled at mimicry.

At one hundred meters, they rose up above the buildings.

How had they been moving around Academy City? And could Kihara Yuiitsu really make surprise attacks without anyone noticing if she was accompanied by monsters this large? The answer to those questions was quite simple.

The plesiosaur-like carnivorous inchworms had been here from the beginning.

They blended into the background until Yuiitsu gave her orders.

Not long after the heat wave and swarm of Elements had begun, Kamijou's school had decided the ground was dangerous. That was why they had moved between buildings using the metal wires and searched Academy City along those limited routes.

But what if?

What if these had been standing right next to them as they viewed Academy City from the building rooftops? What if these had been staring at them while they were well within range of the monsters' claws and fangs? Wasn't it possible they had been crawling between these things' legs while thinking they were safely on those wires? To create new "paths" to expand their range of travel, they had tossed metal wires between buildings. What if the weight tied to the end of the wire had unnaturally bounced off something in midair? Simply imagining it sent a chill down his spine.

At any rate, those monsters had now appeared to surround Salome and the others.

They had lured the girls in and cut off their escape route and supply line to isolate them. Only now would they attack all at once to kill the girls.

Kamijou could sense the wicked intentions of whoever was commanding them.

"Salo-…!!"

Kamijou tried to cry out, but it was already over.

"Again. Did you really think this would be enough to hold us back?"

Kamisato Kakeru spoke.

He was their king. He had no special power in his right hand and a single hit would take him out, but he actually stepped forward himself. It looked like he planned to break through the circle of 100 meter kaiju-like Elements to rescue the girls from their plight.

"Kh…You goddamn stupid Onii-chan…!!"

Salome shouted back at him, while ignoring the threat to her own life, but Kamisato ignored her.

He spoke with a calm look on his face.

“Make sure you don’t get caught in the middle of this.”

“?”

He was a normal high school boy who could not use esper powers or magic.

The action he took was simple. He stuck his hand in the heavy tote bag he held, pulled out a large metal can, and tossed it onto the scorching asphalt.

Yes, he threw it at the feet of a monster that rivaled the high-rise buildings in height.

Just before it stepped on the metal can like an ant, Kamijou spotted the label.

(Rust-proofing spray?)

The effects were immediate.

One of the Elements that seemed as immovable as mountains spun quickly around as if it had slipped on ice. Due to its unique plesiosaur-like body, its center of gravity was located quite high up.

The Element whipped up a violent wind as it collapsed with enough force to knock over a few nearby buildings.

“Ahhhhhh!!”

An incredible amount of dust and chunks of concrete larger than buses rained down, so Kamijou made a frantic escape.

“No matter how large they are, they still aren’t immune to the laws of physics. In fact, the heavier they are, the easier it is for their own weight to get the better of them.”

Kamisato did not even flinch.

“Basically, they become entirely useless if they so much as slip on a banana peel. I’ve heard America is developing a special gel grenade. By firing it below the target’s feet and making the ground slippery, they can completely neutralize infantry and tanks. They’re cheaper than stun grenades and they can safely rescue a hostage without doing damage to their eyes or ears.”

The fallen Element tried to get back up, but Kamisato did not give it the chance.

He pulled something like synthetic rope from his tote bag. Cans of food were tied to the ends, presumably as weights. He spun it around at a decent length like a morning star and then threw it toward the fallen Element’s neck.

Then he threw the other end at a standing Element’s leg.

The rope caught on the hundred meter carnivorous inchworm, but the rope did not provide much resistance and the giant monster swung its leg.

With an unpleasant sound, the fallen kaiju-sized Element had its head torn right off.

“Even if it’s too big a job for us, we can always get some help from the Elements themselves,” spat out Kamisato. “And they’re big. They’re more than fifty times our size. A rope as thick as our thumb will be as thin and sturdy as piano wire to them. As long as we pay attention to how we apply the force…well, you saw it. *We can cut down the Elements.*”

Finally, the bizarrely-shaped monsters looked elsewhere.

Their focus shifted from the girls to the boy who presented an even greater danger.

The earth shook as the hundred meter Elements approached.

A swarm of three meter Class 1s shaped like extremely flat bugs slipped between their legs to attack. They were attacking in waves of differing sizes.

"Bark mantises, hm?"

But Kamisato Kakeru remained unfazed.

He pulled several plastic sheets from his tote bag, applied plenty of instant glue to the surface, and tossed them into the air. The plastic sheets spun like frisbees to fly high and far. They were aimed toward the giant wings of a clearwing moth Element.

Butterfly and moth wings created unique whirling air currents and were known to create lift on the level of an airplane or helicopter but scaled down for their size.

Those wings had been honed by natural selection into the optimal form that did not allow the slightest error.

And that was why attaching the many plastic sheets created random bumps that slightly disturbed the flow of air along the wings. No, it "peeled away" the airflow, so the miraculous lift could not be maintained.

The Element stalled, entered a tailspin, and fell.

It fell right on top of the many bark mantises approaching Kamisato Kakeru like they were swarming a piece of candy.

High-pitched sounds of shattering crystal blended together. The vortex of noise sounded like a giant chandelier falling.

"Everyone thinks about it."

Kamisato Kakeru spoke without any change to his expression.

He placed his feet on the hill of clear rubble lying bent and broken after falling to the ground.

He chose to walk toward the hundred meter Elements.

"What if armed terrorists attacked my school? What if a small child holding a piggy bank came crying to me, asking me to clear his framed father’s name? What if I began a final SNS war at the request of an idol threatened with being kicked out of the group if she did not win first place in the next electronic popularity poll? You decide what you would want to do and how you would do it. …It isn’t that unusual. Any normal high school boy will think about it at least once.”

He stuck his hand into the tote bag.

He pulled out a new weapon.

“But I just so happened to have the power to grab ahold of those dreams.”

A plesiosaur-like Element roared overhead.

A red light filled its chest. It raised its translucent head. It had a Fire core. If it breathed fire, everyone here would be blown away like fluff.

“So I was afraid. Not of my right hand’s power, but of those girls’ smiles. Of that group that would agree to whatever I said. I thought the day would come when my power wasn’t enough to stop them and the responsibility still fell on me.”

But Kamisato remained unfazed.

He crossed the hill of rubble to face that powerful enemy on his own two feet.

“But I won’t run away any longer.”

He did not hide behind the girls.

He stood as a shield to protect them.

“Prepare yourself, one-hit wonder. I’ll show you the freedom of a normal high school boy.”

It was overwhelming.

Kamijou completely forgot to join in.

Just before the carnivorous inchworm Element poured all of its power into its plesiosaur-like mouth, Kamisato threw the clear bottle he held.

It shattered when it hit the leg the giant monster had just placed on the ground.

As soon as the thick liquid poured out, Kamijou saw white chemical smoke and heard a sound like bacon in a frying pan.

“No matter how bizarre they look they still have organic carbon-based bodies just like us. That means they’ll corrode like normal from hydrochloric acid or sulfuric acid. The mall had plenty of industrial cleaners. I just had to boil them down to concentrate them.”

The damage was only 1/100 or even 1/200 of the monster’s giant body, but that foot had been supporting a body as tall as a high-rise building. It was a lot like a pin heel breaking without warning.

It was only the slightest fragment of damage, but the kaiju-like body lost its balance and collapsed, bringing down some nearby buildings with it.

“Salome, Luca. Finish it off.”

“…Oh. Sure thing, goddamn stupid Onii-chan!!”

“Oh, no! Oh, no! If I don’t stay focused, I’ll end up sitting here watching in awed admiration! Shudder!!”

The mass murderer and pirate girl came back to their senses and swarmed the collapsed Class 6 Element.

Kamijou was taken aback too.

Had Kamisato been able to do all this when they had first met? He had fought Kamisato during the attack on his dorm that night, but the boy had been an amateur fighter then. Meanwhile, a Class 6 was a powerful enough enemy to defeat a group of Tokiwadai girls. And yet he had defeated them so easily?

“Anyone can do it in their mind.”

Kamisato pulled an L-shaped crowbar from the tote bag.

“The question is whether or not they can give it physical form. I was blessed with the chance to do that.”

“This is…”

Kamijou gulped as he spoke.

“This is the kind of normal high school boy you can find anywhere?”

Kamisato rested the crowbar on his shoulder and looked back for a casual reply.

“Yes. And?”

Part 6

Afterwards, Kamisato Kakeru and the surrounding girls crushed every last one of the Elements and continued forward.

One was a ghost girl, one was a cosplay girl, and one was a trombone girl.

They took an entirely different approach from the pirate girl and armor girl who moved in for close-quarters combat.

They wore down the giant Elements with an overwhelming long-distance barrage.

The result reached Kamijou's eyes, but his brain rejected it. After all, wasn't this something the Tokiwadai girls had been unable to do? It would have taken sacrifices to overwhelm the giant Water lizard with its ultra-high pressure water cutter. Wasn't that why Kamijou had gone out as bait?

He gulped.

The scene before his eyes and the girls surrounding him…were superior to the entirety of Tokiwadai's elite firepower group?

"These Element things are known as reduced life forms. We mostly know how they work after 'opening up' a few of them and checking inside." Kamisato spoke calmly, but that was what made it sound so full of contempt. "Over long periods of time, the remains of animals and plants turn into petroleum. So would it be possible to reverse the process and differentiate petroleum into any animal or plant? Maybe you could call it a heretical science that does the exact opposite of stem cells. But no matter how much kinetic energy their giant bodies give them, they're only borrowing it all from existing plants and animals. The movable direction of their joints and the extension of their muscles all follow set rules. Once you know the trick, it isn't that difficult to read their movable range and locate the safe zones."

"…"

“That only leaves the fire, water, wind, and earth cores. Since they’re relying on a magical element at the most basic level, the reduced life form method must have only been able to create the outward forms. Kihara Yuiitsu must not have reached the level of creating a soul or a life. But it really comes down to a simple combination. I bet she wishes she could have disguised the color of the light. It’s like needlessly pointing out in advance you’re planning to hit a homerun each time. When they’re making that large, obvious swing, it’s really easy to slip a curveball past them.”

They were a hybrid of magic and science.

Tokiwadai Middle School had been collecting the remains of destroyed Elements, but they had not discovered this much. And Index had not mentioned the Elements cores despite her perfect memory of 103,000 grimoires.

Where did Kamisato Kakeru stand?

What could he see with his “normal sensibilities” supported by those many girls?

He had claimed anyone could do this in their head.

Would “the kind of normal high school boy one could find anywhere” really undergo such an extensive transformation just by gaining the specific techniques and a basis to support them…or as he had put it, “the power to grab ahold of those dreams”?

He could move his body exactly as he wanted.

That might sound like something anyone could do, but Kamijou knew from his many experiences just how difficult that was when one’s life was on the line. Kamisato’s ability was not reduced in that way. He could always freely choose from the greatest range of possibilities and act on them.

That may have made him even stranger than the many different girls surrounding him.

“To be honest, this is the scene I was afraid of.”

The boy himself spoke quietly while viewing the series of wild flashes of light.

“I was afraid these commonplace girls would decisively stray from the commonplace path. I was afraid someone as bland as me didn’t belong in the lead and that it was all my right hand acting as a crown. I was afraid that losing my right hand would cause this scene to shift to someone else like the joker in a game of old maid. I was always so very afraid of that.”

“You…”

“But once I actually lost it, I understood.”

Kamisato did not stop.

He walked step by step down the path cleared by the girls.

“Even without my special right hand, the world continued on just fine. Those girls weren’t following me because of the right hand. They chose to of their own free will. That’s all this is.”

The extraordinary Elements that had to be Kihara Yuiitsu’s prized weapons were defeated one after another.

Kamijou and the others were already quite near the Windowless Building.

But this time, arriving there did not end it. They had to make Kihara Yuiitsu panic so she would open the secret entrance from the inside. And they could not exactly march around and around the stationary building.

“Do you really think Kihara Yuiitsu will come out?”

“She will.” Kamisato did not hesitate to reply. “The trick when making a bluff is a lack of information, not an excess. Just like showing someone a series of film frames will make stopped images appear to be moving, human beings fill in the gaps with their own mind. We don’t need to build up every inch of the stage. As long as we gather the necessary factors as unconnected dots, she'll draw her own line between them and imagine the worst."

"?"

"One." Kamisato raised one of his borrowed women's fingers. "We intervened in the incident at Tokiwadai Middle School. We saw what Kihara Yuiitsu was especially focused on destroying. It may have looked like a symbol of violence if you weren't paying attention, but that thoroughness was a sign of fear. We just had to pick up on that."

The answer was the star player in the Element battles even among the powerful espers of Tokiwadai.

Misaka Mikoto's hangar.

And what had been built in there?

"Two. Kihara Yuiitsu escaped us, but we picked up something else at Tokiwadai Middle School. That would be you, Kamijou Touma. …It doesn't matter how much knowledge you actually have. She just has to think you've taken the baton from Tokiwadai."

It may have been like the defection of an engineer.

The engineer's actual skill did not matter. The fact that someone from a secret research lab was in another country's hands was a major diplomatic card. The other country could claim they were building new weapons with the information. The first country might be skeptical, but proving it to be a bluff would be quite difficult.

"And three. I'd rather not say it, but the Kamisato Faction is a collection of heretics. Fran has a power generation station capable of scattering microwaves all across Academy City and Salome completed her cyborg surgery on her own. We're another black box to her. Could it be? What if? We just have to inspire those whispers of doubt."

In other words…

"The A.A.A. If that demon rises into the dawn sky, I doubt even Kihara Yuiitsu will be able to keep her cool."

Something passed by overhead.

Special armor covered the arms and legs and countless cannons of various sizes grew from the back. The steel-winged silhouette tore through the sky with the two boosters around the waist. Upon seeing it, Kamijou spoke without thinking. He may have taken the optimistic view of "at least she's all right".

"What is that? Is it Misaka?"

But he was wrong.

That girl was…

"Claire…? The plant girl!?"

"All of her body's cells have changed to something almost identical to plant cells. And by bonding with them, she can absorb metal or anything else to mass-produce plant chainsaws or homing missiles or whatever else."

"You don't mean…?"

She could absorb metal.

And hadn't Kamisato mentioned the Tokiwadai hangar earlier?

Could it be? What if?

Could Claire have *consumed* whatever had been dug up from the rubble!?

"As I said, we just have to make her think that. We know she's obsessed with the A.A.A., perhaps because it's related to that talking dog, so I asked Claire to create a misunderstanding."

"Oh."

"Not even Claire could do this well overnight. We could only line up the remains of the hangar's spare parts to get an idea of the overall design and general silhouette. She can only fly by volatilizing and detonating plant ethanol and the weapons on her back are like bamboo or reeds. They don't move at all. The silhouette looks right in the dim light of early dawn, but Kihara Yuiitsu would probably notice something was wrong right away if it were midday. …Not to mention that the real one isn't really a scientific weapon. It's more of a catalyst for something."

But…

Even so…

"Kihara Yuiitsu doesn't know that."

"…"

"No, she'll have calculated that we're most likely bluffing. But she won't be able to fully accept her own calculations. Could it be? What if? *Maybe the Kamisato Faction really did gather the wreckage from the destroyed hangar, kidnap someone who knew all about it, and asked him how to put it together.* Her game of tag or hide-and-seek didn't require a detour to Tokiwadai, but she did it anyway. However, she failed to finish off Misaka Mikoto and she was driven off by people who aren't even part of Academy City or the science side. If we vanished and spread the 'completed product' around the outside world, who knows how far crude imitations of the A.A.A. would spread. …Kihara Yuiitsu strayed from her primary objective to pursue the A.A.A. This is lure fishing, so we don't need the real thing. Send a fake flitting past their eyes, and even a big fish will take the bait."

So…

So…

So…

"Come on out, Kihara Yuiitsu. Staying put or running off were your only options, but I'll give you an unexpected third option. This is your first and last chance. This isn't the time to calculate out the risks. If you don't fight now, you'll miss your chance."

A heavy metallic noise reverberated across Academy City.

Something rose from the ground like smoke or steam. It came from more than one place. There was a single spot at the same distance from all four cardinal directions of the Windowless Building. The roads were cut apart and perfectly square holes over ten meters across opened up.

"Now, let's go."

Scammers pretending to be a relative would employ a great number of excuses: they were in a traffic accident, they knocked up a girl they barely knew, they embezzled money at work, etc. The stories tended to sound flimsy and unrealistic after the fact, but that worked best for the scammers.

Their performance was not looking for reality. If it was somewhat realistic, people would calmly analyze whether or not it could have actually happened. It was best to present them with a situation they could not judge with their own experiences, leaving their mind entirely empty. The scammers did not care one whit if the victim realized something was wrong only after transferring the money.

That was what Kamisato Kakeru had done to Kihara Yuiitsu.

After placing her in a dead end of "yes or no", he had presented her with a brand-new third option.

Kamijou had done it plenty of times himself.

But Kamisato was using it in an entirely different way. Kamijou had given cornered magicians or espers an alternate route and a way to survive, but Kamisato was cutting off his opponent's escape and crushing the other options so that he could trick them into choosing the wrong thing.

This boy was different in every way.

Being able to draw out everything in one’s mind would not necessarily lead to positive results. Kamisato may have been building something up, but Kamijou could not tell at all what it was. But that may have been why Kamisato had been the one chosen.

He was the kind of normal high school boy one could find anywhere.

He was “someone” who had supposedly come back to his senses after losing his special right hand.

At that point, Kamijou Touma recalled something. He remembered the other thing Kamisato Kakeru had built his identity around.

(Taking revenge on the Magic Gods.)

Kamijou gulped. Not everyone swore revenge when a tragedy occurred before their eyes. Some lamented and harmed themselves, some desperately built up a new life to forget all about it, some lost all will to begin anything new and grew powerless, and some filled with charity to ensure the same tragedy never happened again. And they all developed from there in their own unique ways.

That meant Kamisato Kakeru had some kind of aptitude.

An aptitude for being a normal high school boy and yet not hesitating to pull the proper card from the many in his deck.

At the same time, swearing revenge was not that unusual.

If tragedy befell a class, about one of them might do so.

But not many could maintain that spirit of revenge to the point of carrying it out. Some failed to complete the preparations, some could not abandon their current life, some were overcome by guilt, and some grew so reliant on their desire for revenge that they could not afford to actually complete it and bring it to an end.

Kamisato Kakeru had cleared both hurdles.

People were not defined by their special right hands. They were defined by their actions. If Kamijou was right about that, it meant Kamisato Kakeru had chosen for himself to exterminate so many Magic Gods without hesitation.

He may not have had time to feel any guilt due to how absurdly powerful those enemies were. He may have challenged the Magic Gods with everything at his disposal because he felt reckless and horribly outmatched.

But what if he had known in advance he would settle it all in a single strike? What if he had known a light swing of his arm would erase those Magic Gods without a trace? Could Kamijou have used such a power? The very first time, he may not have known how it worked and been able to do it. But could he have cornered and defeated the second and third Magic Gods? Wouldn't he have felt intense guilt once the title of "absolute" was removed from those great enemies?

"Are…"

"Hm?"

"…Are you okay?"

Not even Kamijou knew what he meant by that.

Kamisato Kakeru replied with a smile.

He looked and sounded just like the kind of normal high school boy one could find anywhere.

"I wish I knew the answer to that myself."

Between the Lines 4

People have always said they have trouble knowing what I'm thinking.

That was fine with me. Or rather, they may have been right. I'm not at all confident I was thinking anything original enough and world-changing enough to be worth telling anyone about.

You can't think about anything too amazing while staring out the window during class.

It was only ever things like what to get for lunch, when I needed to start studying for the exams coming up, or how my sister Salome wanted a new food processer even though she's a terrible cook (and hates more than anyone to be told so).

Dreams of the future?

I don't think I ever really thought about it. Instead of planning where I would go, I just wanted the status quo to continue forever.

The Magic Gods destroyed that.

They gave someone as hopelessly normal as me a strange right hand for their own convenience.

…But was that really true? It may not have been the right hand that caused so many people to gather around me. A certain boy insisted as much and the girls themselves proved it. They stuck with me even after I pathetically lost my right hand.

Ha ha. Maybe I've started to waver.

If I got World Rejecter back now, I might be erased by my own power.

That said, I can't ignore that right hand.

I don’t want it. But I know better than anyone how powerful it is…or I think I do. And I bet Kihara Yuiitsu will use it even more readily than me. After all, she’s crazy enough to release a swarm of Elements on the city just to get back at me. She didn’t enter enemy territory and make a mess of things there. She attacked the very city she had lived and smiled in and she showed no concern for the 2.3 million other people living there. I made an enemy of all the Magic Gods just to get my normal life back and not even I can understand what she’s thinking. If she’s willing to cause that kind of damage at home, how far would she go elsewhere? I could only ever think about terrorists attacking my school or a giant meteor hitting and destroying civilization, so this is too much for my imagination. Kihara Yuiitsu.

The starting point for her has to be that talking dog.

The A.A.A. That tool was entirely unnecessary for finding and killing me, but she was so obsessed with it that she strayed from the optimal path to destroy it. And the A.A.A. originally belonged to that strangely mature golden retriever.

He was just one of the enemies I had to defeat and he wasn’t even one of the Magic Gods. He was an unnecessary hurdle that Academy City placed in my path.

But Kihara Yuiitsu must have seen things differently. He must have been everything to her, to the point that his death set her world boiling.

The value of things differs from person to person.

I know that quite well.

So I believe I have an obligation to play along with Kihara Yuiitsu’s revenge. I took what mattered most to her for my own convenience.

But, well, if I’m going to do it, I’m going to go all out. Just letting someone kill me isn’t my style. Revenge is illogical under the current laws. Yuiitsu and I hold the vengeance mentality that grew in people’s hearts before modern law was established.

In an older time, there were a few rules to govern revenge. First, killing someone for justified revenge was not considered a crime. Second, only taking revenge personally would reclaim the deceased's honor. And third, if the target of revenge killed the vengeance-seeker in defense, it would not be considered a crime.

If revenge was simply considered the killer's just deserts, that system would not have been established. The vengeance-seeker would only have needed to corner and kill the killer. However, the killer was given a way out. And I don't think that was just the privileged class creating the rules to protect themselves.

It wouldn't be exciting otherwise.

Revenge is different from a normal death sentence. Fighting with all your might felt like a real accomplishment and cleared away your grudge. It was like the difference between chopping a dead fish into sashimi and chopping a living fish into ikezukuri.

In that case, I had to play along.

…To be honest, I was close to losing my "reason" for revenge. I had twisted those girls, so I had wanted to return them to their original classroom scenes. But if it was not the special right hand that twisted them, it was possible it may not have been dependent on my presence at all.

Ellen, Claire, Elsa, and all the other girls. I honestly enjoy how they adore me and I can actually admit that now, but they can get by on their own now. Even my sister Salome seems to have mellowed some since meeting Kamijou Touma. She may grow out of being a mass murderer before long.

I want to be with them.

I want to stay by their sides forever.

But if my presence is holding them back, I'm prepared to walk a different path. My top priority isn't my own happiness. Just like a rocket that's cut away partway up to space, I'm fine with only being someone who gives them a push forward.

So let’s end this.

I won’t make them drag me around. I will swallow this vengeance on my own. I was the only one that dealt with that talking dog. I didn’t ask those girls for help. I will take responsibility. So whatever form it might take, I will sever the harmful bonds connecting me to those unrelated girls.

These are my just deserts, so I won’t hesitate to play along with your madness, Kihara Yuiitsu. Throw your grudge at me with everything you’ve got.

I might die here.

But even if you end up losing your life in my attempt to give you the best and most exciting revenge possible, no hard feelings, okay?

Now, let us sing the praises of life.

Have you finished sharpening the blade of revenge, fellow vengeance-seeker? The blade to cut you down in self-defense is right here.

Chapter 4: A Sudden Change that Tells of Ruin – Operation_Right_Hand.

Part 1

Square holes had opened in the ground the same distance from the four cardinal directions of the Windowless Building. Kamijou and Kamisato descended underground through one of them. The inside was a special concrete slope that maintained a set angle. There were no lights except for the small ones pointing to the emergency exit.

Fran’s heat wave microwaves must have been cut off because Swimsuit Kamijou felt a shiver down his spine. The chill of winter returned in this darkness.

At first, he thought this was a large passageway meant to allow trucks to drive materials in.

But that was wrong.

That was clear enough once they reached the bottom of the slope.

“What…is this?”

They found an incredibly large space. When filming secret bases for a Sentai series, it was common to use a giant underground pool used to gather concentrated rainwater because those underground facilities were exciting to see, but this was even larger than that. Plus, there was no sign of any pillars used to hold up the earth. It was not supported by inflating it with air like a domed stadium and Kamijou had trouble deciding whether it was even possible with existing construction technologies. How was the weight being distributed?

But the strangest aspect of the underground space had to do with the height rather than the size of the other two dimensions.

More accurately, it was the ceiling.

A great number of giant metal cylinders hung down like icicles or stalactites. The bottom end grew wider like a trumpet and Kamijou had trouble imagining what they were at first. He mistakenly leaped to the conclusion that he was in a strange metal botanical garden.

But.

He finally managed to focus on reality once he recalled the long slope they had walked down and combined that with the strange objects on the ceiling.

Yes, a certain thought came to mind:

“You’re kidding…right? Those things hanging down from the ceiling look a lot like rocket engines to me…”

“You might not be wrong. I’ve heard rocket engines spray out a ton of water to make sure they don’t damage their own parts with their heat, so the slope we descended may have been ducts to expel all the steam during takeoff.”

That might seem possible when looking at each individual part, but the location of this underground area led to a frightening conclusion.

“Then…wait. What does that mean? This is right below the Windowless Building. That would mean *the building itself is made to leave the earth*!!”

“I’ve heard it’s made to survive a direct hit from a nuke, so it’s got to be resistant to heat and radiation. I don’t know what it’s like on the inside, but if it has a proper circulation established, it’s basically an artificial planet. It would be able to leave the solar system or even the Milky Way. Since it hasn’t done so yet, it might still be making its preparations.”

“…”

This was insane.

It was so insane that Kamijou was hit by a fundamental question: Why had Academy City been built?

Kamisato, however, remained carefree, perhaps because he was not a resident of the city.

“But all of that is just a guess based on the different pieces we’ve seen. And this is no time to be thinking about the origin of this underground structure. Don’t lose sight of the true issue, Kamijou Touma. Our goal is defeating ‘that person’. For you, that will wipe out the Elements and bring back your peaceful days. For me, it will prevent a third party from misusing that loathsome right hand.”

The boy with a stranger’s hand sewn on slowly lined up alongside Kamijou.

Their surroundings changed as if in response.

Definite fires lit in the nearly unlit space. They looked like the obvious will-o’-the-wisps of a haunted house, but they were the size of lighthouse lights. They were red, blue, yellow, and green. The four light sources were located up above and they eerily illuminated their surroundings while looking down at the boys.

They were 100 meter Class 6 Elements.

It was a group of giant crocodiles and carnivorous inchworms.

The ducts had only been about ten meters across, so nothing this large could have passed through. So had they been built inside here after carrying in the materials, just like a bottle ship?

And the mad scientist behind it waited below the light in the center of the space.

“Kihara…Yuiitsu.”

"Hello, hello."

When Kamijou uttered a scratchy voice, the woman smiled and raised a hand.

She was dressed differently from before. Either not even she had been able to endure the heatwave caused by the high power microwaves or she was simply enjoying the situation. She wore her lab coat over a red bikini. The chill of winter had returned to this space because the microwaves could not get in, but her entire body looked heated and healthy.

No.

She had a reason for her body to be boiling.

The right hand she casually waved was roughly sewn on at the wrist like a repaired stuffed animal. The fingertips were slender, but they had a clear lack of femininity. It was blatantly obvious that she had sewn on a stolen hand.

That was Kamisato Kakeru's right hand.

It was World Rejecter.

"To be honest, Kamijou Touma-kun, I have no real interest in you. I only have business with Kamisato Kakeru. So if you turn around now, I'll just let you leave. Would you be willing to do that?"

"Hell no."

"Are you worried about my Elements swarming Academy City once the heat wave is removed? …But that shows a fundamental misunderstanding of the situation. My objective is Kamisato Kakeru and the Elements are merely pawns to that end. The A.A.A. was only a detour, but there are some things I just can't overlook. If the Kamisato Faction is defeated here, the microwaves from above will naturally stop. In other words, this is the final battle. On the other hand, if Kamisato Kakeru kills me, the Elements will stop and he will lose any reason to keep the heat wave going. So whoever wins here, both problems will end. Academy City will return to normal all on its own. There's nothing for you to worry about."

Kamijou thought about that for just a bit.

It was true that he was not at the center of this issue. This was a confrontation between Kamisato Kakeru and Kihara Yuiitsu who had exchanged right hands. The girls of the Kamisato Faction could defeat the giant Elements without Kamijou's right hand, so this would be over no matter who won. Even if Kamijou desperately swung his right hand around, it would not change the result much.

He understood all that.

But he still repeated himself.

"Again: hell no."

"…Oh, dear."

"Your Elements nearly killed Aogami Pierce and Fukiyose at the water department. They destroyed Tokiwadai Middle School and hurt Misaka and the other girls there. And I'm sure there were plenty of other tragedies I'm not aware of. You're saying all of that will end on its own? You're saying I should just sit idly by and watch? How the hell can I do that!? You've proven how much you can do. You'll just be switching it off for the time being, but you'll still be able to do the same thing any time you want!! I'll at least be crushing that possibility here, Kihara Yuiitsu!!"

Kamijou Touma had moved between schools and shelters instead of staying in one place.

They had each used different facilities and equipment, they had each seen a different world and problems, and they had each been in different circumstances, but they had all wanted one thing.

They had wanted their normal lives to return.

They had wanted to live a life free of worry.

They had wanted to be freed from the constant fear for their lives.

They may have seen things differently and been able to do far less, but that did not mean Misaka Mikoto would have made light of Aogami Pierce and Fukiyose Seiri's desperate efforts. Similarly, Kamisato had no right to mock Misaka. And as the source of it all, Kihara Yuiitsu had no right to just end it while ignoring everyone's thoughts and voices as they desperately worked to survive throughout Academy City.

Ending this was something only the people suffering in Academy City could do.

Kamisato Kakeru and the girls around him had special powers and clever minds, so they may have been the most realistic choice for clashing with Kihara Yuiitsu.

But that was not enough.

They had known the truth from the beginning and made secret preparations, so their pain and suffering were insufficient to hear everyone's voices and understand that pressure. They only understood in theory or on paper, but they did not truly understand how the people felt as they risked their lives in the sweltering heat wave to gather just one day's worth of food and water while the Elements pursued them. It was pissing Kamijou off how casually they pretended like they understood.

If someone knew in advance that their cruise ship would be sunk and had prepared life vests and life boats, how could they understand the efforts of those who were thrown into the frigid sea with no warning whatsoever? How could they understand how reliable the buoyancy of a single plank of wood or plastic container felt or how much effort had gone into securing one?

"This isn't about efficiency. I don't care what 'makes sense'!! I need to report back to everyone that this is actually over and that it won't happen again!! If I can't tell them they can remove the barricades, leave their schools, and go home, then the fear isn't truly over!! Whether or not the heat wave leaves and whether or not the Elements go away is a different issue. I won't let this nightmare drag on and I need the truth to do that. And I'm not about to let you and your know-it-all face hold onto the final key and throw it into some black box!!!!!!”

Kihara Yuiitsu responded with a quiet laugh in her swimsuit and lab coat.

She maintained a smile as she readily replied.

“Then you can die along with them. I don’t care about good and evil or like and dislike as much as Sensei did.”

The wind roared.

The four giant Elements ruling this space had all moved at once and that had whipped up the air.

Kamisato Kakeru did not bat an eye.

He gently lifted the L-shaped crowbar that rested on his shoulder like the grim reaper’s scythe.

He had already defeated several Class 6s on the surface and the girls of the Kamisato Faction could defeat them individually. The only question for him may have been how to make use of the large but enclosed space.

But what happened next far exceeded Kamijou’s expectations.

“Wha-…?”

The 100 meter Elements did not attack Kamijou or Kamisato. Nor did they start with the girls surrounding them.

They moved the other way.

They rushed toward Kihara Yuiitsu, their master!!!???

“Devour.”

A tremendous sound burst out.

At some point a portion of the Elements vanished. Kamijou’s eyes had not been able to follow what happened.

He only heard a sticky and squishy sound coming from Kihara Yuiitsu’s left arm.

“Devour. Ha ha. Devour, devour.”

He had assumed this oddity came from the right hand she had stolen.

But it did not.

The strange sound came from her unnaturally throbbing left hand and translucent, blade-like claws extended from the fingertips.

“Ah ha ha ah ha ha ha ha ha ah ha ah ha ah ha ha!! Devour, devour, yes, devourrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!!”

Each time she swung her arm, more of the Elements, which should have been her greatest fighting force, disappeared. At the same time, the beautiful bodylines decorated by her swimsuit and lab coat crawled and throbbed in a way that ignored her original muscles and bones.

No, Kamijou and the others may have been looking at it all wrong.

The Elements were indeed toys created by Kihara Yuiitsu, but they were not meant to attack anyone directly. They had another purpose.

“My food.”

Her whispered voice sent a chill down the spine of all who heard it.

The back of her lab coat exploded. Sharp, crystalline protrusions grew from her back and created something like giant wings. Other protrusions resembled eyeballs, claws, or fangs.

“I thought they might be too tough after raising them underground while feeding them the ones sent out to graze, but that’s fine for now. I might dislike Misaka Mikoto’s insolence, but she was perfect for a warmup exercise. I’m up against Kamisato Kakeru who defeated Sensei’s original A.A.A., so I need to be able to defeat something like that without any real difficulty.”

With a high-pitched sound, translucent armor covered both her legs. It was unbelievably cold, but it had a streamlined and biological look. Perhaps to preserve that uniqueness, her hands remained uncovered, but her overall silhouette was familiar.

Kamijou gulped.

“That’s…another A.A.A.?”

Dog's life

The bizarre researcher gave a mocking smile.

“I used a different approach from Sensei and constructed it all on my own without any help from that annoying Aleister.”

She formed a gun with her borrowed right hand and pressed the index finger against her temple as she spoke.

The two long, narrow boosters on her back lit with a red light almost immediately.

“So let’s enjoy this, Kamisato Kakeru. For you, this would be round two! You don’t have World Rejecter this time, but I wouldn’t hesitate even if you did!! Now that you can’t cheat, how much can you struggle against an A.A.A. that took a different path from Sensei? I am going to enjoy tormenting you to death *just like Sensei should have done with his A.A.A.*!!”

Part 2

Kamisato Kakeru…or rather, the girls on either side of him shot forward like artillery shells.

Salome, the mass murderer in a white swimsuit and double raincoats, and the pirate girl, who wore a pirate hat and a bikini, were both monsters who had torn through the Class 6 Elements as a close-quarters combat pair.

But Kihara Yuiitsu did not care.

“Hee hee.”

She laughed quietly.

Her many cannons fired.

The girls ducked low like anti-ship missiles charging a warship as they approached Yuiitsu. But Yuiitsu had never intended to hit them with that. After getting them to duck down and thus restricting their freedom of movement, she made her true attack along their straight line path. It had all been preparation for this.

“Ah.”

The pirate girl was the first to speak up.

Kihara Yuiitsu swung a ridiculously long anti-special steel chainsaw down from above.

“…Tch!!”

While running alongside her in her white school swimsuit and raincoats, Salome kicked the pirate girl in the side. That altered the girl’s path somewhat.

A moment later, the chainsaw twice their height dropped down.

Salome crossed her weapons…or rather, her arms to protect her head, but instead of being cut, she was knocked to the ground as if she had been hit by a barbell. Her severed brown arm flew through the air and passed right by Kamijou's face.

It was destroyed with the sound of something hard being chewed to pieces. At this rate, she would lose her other artificial arm and then her head and torso would be bisected vertically. Once that happened, not even a self-made cyborg would escape unharmed.

Kamijou immediately gave a yell.

"*The fat alternative,* Kamisato!!"

"Heh."

The boy pulled two plastic bottles from his tote bag and tossed one to Kamijou.

They contained the type of liquid glue found in any department store's stationery section.

And the two of them simultaneously threw the bottles at Kihara Yuiitsu from different angles.

More accurately, at the chainsaw blade.

They burst as soon as they touched it, but that was of course not going to stop the rapidly rotating blade.

But something did change.

Salome had been protecting her face and torso by crossing her arms, but the blade did not sink any lower toward her. It continued spinning, but it was no longer cutting.

"Long ago, executioner's axes would apparently grow useless from the human blood and fat that got on the blade! Not even the sharpest Japanese swords were used to cut cleanly through ten or twenty people in battle. They were really used to beat people down with the weight of the steel!!”

Kihara Yuiitsu tilted her head a little, snapped the claw-like protrusions of armor, and grinned.

“Ohh, I see.”

“Gah!?”

Since the chainsaw could no longer cut, she swung it straight down. She slammed Salome’s body to the ground instead of cutting her.

Even the mass murderer who had caused so much trouble for Academy City was reduced to this.

And before Yuiitsu could push the chainsaw forward, the Kamisato Faction took action. The ghost girl and cosplay girl created a barrage of high firepower long-range attacks that flew toward Yuiitsu like a solid wall.

“Hee hee.”

But Yuiitsu still laughed.

And she continued smiling as she and the A.A.A. she wore disappeared.

Kamijou’s eyes widened.

“She still has the Elements’ translucent mimicry!?”

Before he could say anything more, she made her next move.

Kihara Yuiitsu had approached right in front of him while blending into the background by hiding behind the many cannons and armor. And she was swinging the anti-special steel chainsaw in a diagonal path.

It did not matter if it could cut or not.

Even Salome had been helplessly crushed.

She would have died if not for her self-made cyborg body.

Even without the cutting edge, its solid weight could not be denied. Not even the other girls could stop it. Not to mention Kamisato Kakeru who was only a high school boy now that he had lost his special right hand. He could not stop it or dodge it now.

But.

If Kihara Yuiitsu's A.A.A. was still fundamentally the same as the Elements…

“Ah, ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

Kamijou let out a roar.

He roared and cut in.

He used the yell to force down the instinctual fear of the roaring chainsaw and he stepped forward. He swung his right hand. One touch to the translucent blade destroyed the part that resembled a rotating bicycle chain with blades attached. It whipped around like a writhing snake and nearly chopped off Kamijou's ear.

“My Elements are reduced lifeforms supported by a magic element, so it is true they are weak to your right hand.”

But he did not have time to bring a hand to his ear to check on it.

Kamijou and Yuiitsu were already staring each other in the eye at close range.

“But your right hand is weak to my right hand. Isn't that right?”

“…!!!???”

Kihara Yuiitsu raised her crudely sewn-on right hand. Its shadow danced out.

If Imagine Breaker and World Rejecter clashed, Kamijou would lose.

And if he lost his right hand, not even he knew what would happen. Would it devour Kihara Yuiitsu, would it turn around and kill him, or would it transform the unrelated girls around them into a pool of blood? He only knew that the unpredictable box *did not contain even a glimmer of hope.*

The flow of time seemed to stall and Kihara Yuiitsu's right hand moved oddly slowly. Its shadow tried to cover Kamijou's entire body as he desperately tried to twist out of the way.

It successfully locked onto him.

And she did not hesitate to speak.

"*Do you wish for a new world?*"

Time sped back up.

But as unpleasant sweat poured from his body, Kamijou remained alive in this world.

There was a simple reason for this: Kamisato Kakeru.

He had pulled a one-touch umbrella from his tote bag, opened it with this thumb, and held it out to hide Kamijou's upper body.

The shadow of Kihara Yuiitsu's right hand shifted from Kamijou's upper body and to the umbrella.

With a dull bursting sound, the synthetic fiber material took the hit for him.

"World Rejecter can eliminate all things if the proper conditions are met, but it's still reliant on the hand's shadow for targeting. So if you move the shadow elsewhere, something else can take the hit."

Kamisato spoke quietly with a calm look on his face.

"You really should prepare more before fighting."

"…"

He had so easily neutralized the powerful right hand that had slaughtered Magic Gods by the dozen.

No one knew how to handle World Rejecter better than him.

He tossed aside the destroyed umbrella and quickly called some names.

"Maya, Olivia."

The ghost girl and cosplay girl on his left and right began to move. They normally specialized in long-distance bombardments, but were they preparing to fire at point blank range? Kihara Yuiitsu began to fall back without thinking. And…

"And Salome."

"!?"

It came from directly behind.

As if to get back at her for the chainsaw attack, the one-armed mass murderer charged toward Kihara Yuiitsu. She ran into the forest of weapons on the back of the A.A.A. Everything that formed that steel-winged demon was a meal for Salome.

"You haven't forgotten I'm a magician that gains power by using the weapons I destroy as a sacrifice to my god, have you!? Yes, I couldn't consume the Elements when they were 'life forms', but the A.A.A. is a 'weapon'!!"

If Kihara Yuiitsu had that power taken, she would have lost her precious advantage. And even if not, tearing away the weapons would reduce the number of cards available to her.

More and more disturbing sounds came from her back.

"Why you…"

Just as Yuiitsu began moving the weapons on her back, Kamisato Kakeru right hand gave a casual push to Kamijou Touma's back.

It pushed him forward.

Realizing what Kamisato meant, Kamijou clenched his right fist tight and gave a roar.

"Like I'll let you do that!!"

"Now, what will you do? You're stuck between a rock and a hard place. Both of these opponents are perfect for devouring your Element-made A.A.A."

Kihara Yuiitsu's face was covered in sweat, but she gave a belligerent smile.

"Ha ha! Perfect!!"

She was not focused on the boy in front of her or the girl behind her.

The eyeball and claw-like protrusions creaked and all of the cannons let out a roar.

Explosive noises and shockwaves filled the entire enclosed space. Kamijou felt a dull pain spreading from his eardrums. His feet were pinned to the ground just as he started running forward. It was like a solid wall of sound… no, an acoustic weapon. Kihara Yuiitsu had simultaneously fired all of her cannons without aiming. She hit them all with something other than the shells and laser beams and Salome was no exception. The shockwaves and heat collided with her body and the brown girl in a white swimsuit and double raincoats floated up from the ground. She was thrown through the air.

Only about half of the weapons remained on Yuiitsu's back, but those remaining weapons groaned as they accurately pursued Salome through the air.

Before Salome could land, countless lasers and sensor-assisted anti-air fire gave a roar. There was nothing she could do. It was possible she would be sent flying into the heavens without ever setting foot on the ground again.

But that may have been why supposedly powerless Kamisato Kakeru pushed past everything to step toward Kihara Yuiitsu.

Kamijou thought his throat had gone dry.

Next he felt a heavy blow to his gut. He looked down and saw the large tote bag that the other boy had relied on so far. It took a second to realize that Kamisato had thrown it to him.

He really was defenseless now.

Utterly unarmed, Kamisato Kakeru ran forward in order to protect this sister, even if she was a mass murderer.

“Are you serious? …Hey!!”

Kamijou forced the words out of his convulsing throat.

Kihara Yuiitsu was still Kihara Yuiitsu even with her weapons taken. The A.A.A. was extraordinarily powerful and Kamijou had fought her once before. She had a special martial arts technique that created bubbles in one’s blood and she had a wide variety of options after weakening and harnessing the St Germain virus and Sample Shoggoth. Even with Imagine Breaker, Kamijou had not stood a chance, so he seriously doubted Kamisato could do anything without his power.

And in fact, a flower of blood blossomed just a second later. It was definitely Kamisato Kakeru’s blood. Because Yuiitsu had all of her cannons aimed back toward Salome, she had reached back, torn off a piece of crystal rubble still reluctantly clinging to her back, and thrown it at him. The sharp fragment was twice the length of a pencil.

Kamisato had responded by holding up his powerless right hand.

Yes.

He held up Kihara Yuiitsu’s right hand that had been forcibly sewn on with a needle and thread.

“Ah…what!?”

“So even a Kihara is hurt by that?”

It had pierced straight through the palm, so red blood flowed endlessly from the slender woman’s hand.

“*By seeing a part of your body damaged, that is.*”

“…”

Kihara Yuiitsu’s cheeks stiffened just enough to notice if one was paying attention. She then reached both hands back, tore off more pieces of the useless destroyed weapons, and threw them at close range. She threw more and more, but none of them reached Kamisato. He always held up Yuiitsu’s hand so they slashed the palm, broke the fingers, and destroyed its overall beautiful shape.

The blood loss and pain were afflicting Kamisato, but he smiled even as his face paled and sweat covered his body.

Yuiitsu was the one doing the damage, but she was the one being overwhelmed.

That Kihara was overwhelmed by a normal high school boy.

A solid thud sounded as Salome hit the ground.

Yuiitsu had lost her chance to fire.

Her cannons were still aiming upwards, but they were soon released from that position. They gathered and focused on a single point like a magnifying glass focusing the sun. They aimed at the puny boy who was now the greatest obstacle to be destroyed.

He lightly swung the battered right hand and even smiled as he called a name.

“Elza.”

Immediately afterwards, something large struck Kihara Yuiitsu’s side even as the A.A.A. protected her. It was a human. It was a girl. Her long brown hair was roughly cut into something like fox ears.

However, something about her seemed off.

She had charged in like a four-legged beast rather than a human.

Also, Kihara Yuiitsu’s A.A.A. was her cutting-edge weapon gained by devouring so many Elements. It of course had direct firepower, but it also had to have many other features to assist in aiming and to divert impacts. In other words, it should have been difficult for anyone other than a mass murderer like Salome to get a clean surprise attack in on her.

To do that, they would have to know the A.A.A. better than Yuiitsu herself.

Did a certain name enter her mind?

He was a large dog that shined with a golden light.

He was an eternally inviolable researcher who loved cigars and romance above all else.

“Elza is a magician who controls ‘something like a’ Kokkuri. And a scientist might not be aware, but Kokkuri is spelled with the characters for *fox, dog, and tanuki*.”

“………………………………………………………………………… ……………………………………………………………………………… You’re lying.”

“Tell us all about that stray dog. Depending on where he ended up, Elza might be able to summon him with a single ten yen coin.”

“You’re lyiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiing!!”

“Ah,” was all Kamijou managed to say.

He did not know where this caught at her soul, but Kihara Yuiitsu was in an abnormal state. Kamisato had known enough to grab at the scar, knowing full well what would happen. And he had said himself that this was “something like a” Kokkuri. That meant it was not actually one. Even if it was spelled with the characters for fox, dog, and tanuki, it was still only “something like” it. They could not actually summon a specific animal no matter how hard they tried.

But that did not matter.

Kamisato had said before that the trick when making a bluff was a lack of information and that your opponent would draw their own line between the unconnected dots you provided.

Their cage was complete.

And now that she had been shoved inside the invisible cell, Kihara Yuiitsu actually seemed pathetic.

Kamisato only had to call some names and the girls rushed in. Kihara Yuiitsu was helplessly knocked over along with her A.A.A. and the translucent parts were torn away one after another like ants swarming a doll made of sugar. The armor made of eyeball and claw-like parts, the various cannons, and the thick arms forming the wings were all torn away.

The girls of the Kamisato Faction all had a solid core as they followed the boy. That meant they lacked conflicting desires and thus the stolen World Rejecter was useless against them.

All of the weapons were held down, smashed, and torn away. While pinned to the ground, Kihara Yuiitsu stretched her head forward as if trying to bite at Kamisato Kakeru.

His response was simple.

He formed a fist with the bloody and battered woman’s hand sewn to his wrist.

“*You can have this back.*”

A dull sound burst out.

He did not care if the force of the blow broke the bones in the hand. He used all his strength to slam his fist into that monster’s jaw.

“Ghah…ahhh!!!???”

With her equipment taken, the full blow reached her physical body.

Her brain was shaken and her mind as a researcher and civilized human being grew cloudy.

The mad scientist groaned as she gasped for breath and desperately held onto her own consciousness, but Kamisato looked down at her and lightly waved his borrowed right hand.

“Kihara Yuiitsu. You made one fundamental misunderstanding.”

He spoke quietly down at the woman who could barely move.

“I wasn’t just better than you when it comes to using World Rejecter. …I don’t know your past, but I’ve sought vengeance longer than you as well. So I know very well just what someone like that is thinking.”

“Pant…pant…!!”

“And your inexperience was your undoing. Did the blood rush to your head when I insulted that stray dog? But that was wrong. Would your anger have cooled if I had apologized with tears in my eyes? Of course not. Even if those Magic Gods had begged for their lives and said they’d had a change of heart, I still would have erased them. That’s the only way to fulfill your revenge. Your target might also feel bad about it? They might say something kind? The instant you started thinking that, your revenge had failed.”

"…"

"So I'll be taking that right hand back. It was mine to begin with and it only has meaning when wielded against the Magic Gods who gave it to me. I can't let it create unnecessary victims in your hands."

"Ah, ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

With that yell, a quiet sound came from Kihara Yuiitsu's back teeth.

At the same time, Kamijou and the others were shaken by a low, heavy rumbling.

"Why do you think I chose this location, Mr. Experience? Let me show you my style of revenge."

"…"

Kamijou silently looked up.

The ceiling high, high above was covered in metal cylinders that reminded him of icicles or stalactites. The bottom widened like a trumpet, so they may have been boosters that launched the Windowless Building into space like a rocket.

"It's too late to escape now."

Kihara Yuiitsu gave a mocking smile even after having everything stripped away from her.

"And as someone who knows revenge, I can tell something about you. You've started to waver, haven't you? If revenge was really 'all' you wanted, you would be enraged at having your toy taken and you wouldn't even think about damage to your surroundings! You've gained something else that makes you more than a machine dead-set on revenge!! You can no longer hold World Rejecter. You might even be blown away by your own power the instant you come into contact with the hand!!”

Her voice wavered harshly between strong and weak, but then it grew incredibly peaceful.

“Unlike you, revenge is ‘all’ I have.”

That broke a moment later.

She laughed loudly as if the meter had spun the other way.

“So I won’t hesitate to throw my own life away!! There is no emergency exit or shelter! Revenge isn’t difficult as long that’s all you want to accomplish. You just can’t take on extra objectives like you did.”

Kamisato Kakeru’s expression did not change.

And he once more slammed his stolen fist against Yuiitsu’s smiling face. With that solid sound, the mad vengeance-seeker rolled onto the ground as if he had hit her power switch.

The boosters would ignite soon. Once that happened, the entire space would be exposed to heat even more incredible than a crematory. There was not enough time to run away now. The long, long slope that they had descended was meant to allow the explosively expanding steam to escape. That meant leaving the large space would not bring them to safety. Steam of 100 degrees would catch up to them before they left the slope and their boiling flesh would create a truly hellish scene.

The earth seemed to tremble around them, but Kamisato Kakeru remained calmly silent.

He finally spoke.

“Claire…is up above in the fake A.A.A. Then anyone else who can do it, cut off her right hand and attach mine.”

“B-but, Onii-chan!!”

One-armed Salome frantically interrupted.

She was an eccentric girl who had replaced her entire body with an artificial one without relying on Academy City. Her techniques might be able to attach his hand, but…

"You heard Kihara Yuiitsu, didn't you!? Just touching World Rejecter could blow you away right now, don'tcha think!?"

"But that's the only way to deal with the boosters overhead. I have to erase them with my power."

"There are other ways to destroy them!"

"Destroying them will trigger an explosion. Erasing them is the only way."

"…Eh? Wait a minute. You mean…eh?"

That arrogant mass murderer looked like someone who had assumed their family would always remain happy and then learned their parents were getting a divorce.

Kamisato sighed.

"Kamijou Touma, my tote bag."

"Y-yeah?"

Kamijou handed it over but immediately regretted it.

The boy reached inside, pulled out a spray can, and aimed it at his sister.

The can was labelled "CO_2 Icing Spray".

"You goddamn stupid Onii-…!!!???"

She could not complete her frantic words.

The sound of the spraying did not last long.

“Knocking you out with a physical blow isn’t easy, but you still need to circulate oxygen and carbon dioxide to keep your brain functioning. Now, can you continue breathing in a cloud of highly concentrated carbon gas?”

“Ah…kah…”

The concentration of oxygen would not be that easily changed outside of a sealed tank, but the brown mass murderer was unfortunately wearing two raincoats over her swimsuit. The hood covering her head created a partially sealed space with little space for the gas to escape.

“A rapid change in oxygen concentration isn’t the same as being strangled. If all you need to do is knock someone out, this is a lot faster. Of course, go too far and it could have serious lasting effects on the brain.”

In around a dozen seconds, the mass murderer’s head wobbled. Unable to keep her balance, the girl who had displayed such frightening strength collapsed on the spot.

“I had secretly sworn to myself I would never use this method to stop you. Sorry I’m such an awful brother.”

“Stop…Onii-chan…”

“I won’t stop.”

Kamisato’s expression remained unchanged.

He looked around, confirmed that no one was stepping forward to volunteer their help, and grabbed Yuiitsu’s limp arm. He held a crystal fragment stabbed into the other hand like it was a blade.

It probably was not the sharpest tool, but he had decided it was enough to cut the thread sewing the hand on.

“Fine then. I’ll do it myself.”

No one stopped him.

There were around a hundred girls there and they trusted him enough to give up their lives if he told them to die, but even if they restrained him, they could only wait for the rocket boosters on the ceiling to ignite. This was the end for Kamisato Kakeru whether they stopped him or not, so they froze up, unsure what to choose.

The girls could not move and Salome's short temper was hampered by her cloudy mind.

Who could still move?

There was only one option.

"…lease."

She could not get up and she could barely move, but Salome gave him an imploring look.

Not Kamisato.

She looked to the other boy.

"Please. Punch that giant idiot right this instant and take that away from him. If you don't, he'll…my brother will…"

She sounded on the verge of tears.

She sounded like a small girl who had gotten separated from her family in an unfamiliar city.

"…"

When he found himself the target of her words, Kamijou was reminded why he was here.

He was not exactly friends with Kamisato Kakeru or the girls around him. He would never hand over Othinus for their revenge against the Magic Gods.

But…

He had not considered that this last-second “waver” inside Kamisato had anything to do with him. That would mean the words and kindness directed at Kamisato had gradually built up in his heart and inadvertently helped Kihara Yuiitsu have her revenge.

There was a lot he wanted to say.

Don’t act like you know what you’re talking about. No one really wants to be annihilated. The girls here stood up and helped you, not your right hand. Do you really think they want a world without you?

But he could not say it.

He simply could not.

If he did and the words hit home inside Kamisato, it would only widen the cracks. The “waver” inside him would grow larger and larger, increasing the risk of him being rejected and erased by World Rejecter.

Trying to help him would kill him.

So Kamijou had to swallow the words. He had to force down the words that had risen from his chest to his throat. That was the only way to preserve the slightest chance that Kamisato would survive this.

“Was…”

He may have been overthinking it, but Kamijou found himself cursing something invisible.

“Was this all my fault? Was all your suffering my fault?”

“Ha ha. Not at all.”

With two snapping sounds, the blade passed through his and another’s wrists.

No one could sympathize with his actions, but the most normal smile imaginable remained on his face even as the blood splattered on his cheek.

“It’s true you didn’t accomplish anything decisive in this fight. You were useful, but another pawn might have done just as well. So that must not have been your role here. I think you’re still standing here because you needed to hear what I’m about to say.”

“What is that?”

“It’s simple.”

He boy who knew its destructive power better than anyone did not hesitate to grab the severed hand. The “banishment” may have already begun at that point. But as if to make extra sure, he forced it into place against his wrist.

In the instant before the decisive destruction set in, he left behind a curse.

“Take care of these girls. Don’t worry. Isn’t that what you’ve always done?”

And he made the final attack.

There was no hellfire that was hotter than a crematory and there was no pandemonium of half-destroyed boosters exploding.

Only the frozen stillness of winter remained.

In that instant, a certain boy was erased from the world.

Epilogue: A Model Answer that Exceeds Disaster – Nightmare_by_Lost_Boy.

Meanwhile, Fran, the UFO girl in a pink pajama hoodie and a bikini, held onto her giant balloon with one hand and slowly circled around the Windowless Building. Her rabbit-ear antennae moved around and the round pod on the back of her hips focused here and there. Not to mention the backpack she wore. The bob-cut girl’s job had been to observe the opening of the secret entrance when Kihara Yuiitsu panicked, so she had been on standby since the battle had begun.

Claire, the glasses plant girl who had created an A.A.A. silhouette out of plants, floated nearby with her alcohol fueled boosters.

“Honestly,” said Claire. “When is Kamisato-san going to come out?”

“I don’t know, so don’t ask me.”

“And since our enemy and allies are all gathered underground, can’t you switch off the heat wave? It’s 55 degrees and I’m wilting! I’m going to shrivel up!! Are you trying to turn me into dried fruit!?”

“Direct any complaints to Kamisato-chan.”

The rabbit-ear antennae girl replied bluntly, but then she noticed something.

Someone ran out of one of the square holes located in the four cardinal directions from the Windowless Building.

“Kamisato-san!! …No, it’s that…what was his name?”

“Kamijou Touma.”

Fran shook the carrot stoppers at the end of her hoodie’s strings and released some of the gas from her balloon. Gravity seemed to remember she existed and she lightly descended toward the pointy-haired boy.

“What is it?”

“Wah! Waaahhhh!!!??”

A simple question was enough for the boy to jump in surprise, fall backwards, and land on some dried bushes.

Fran tilted her head while carrying her antennae-covered backpack.

The boy had been acting odd since he came out. Instead of feeling triumphant after defeating Kihara Yuiitsu, he seemed to be desperately fleeing something. And he was not making a planned escape from their expected enemy. He was truly desperate, like he had run across something entirely unexpected. It was like he had seen a ghost or evil spirit.

“Where’s Kamisato-chan? What about the others? Why did you come out alone?”

“Y-you…”

Kamijou gulped and hesitantly asked a question while forgetting to extract himself from the bushes.

“You’re still ‘normal’…?”

“?”

The rabbit-ear antennae girl did not know what he meant. The Kamisato Faction was sometimes asked that sort of thing because of their extreme adoration for Kamisato, but this seemed different.

And then Kamijou Touma’s shoulders trembled. He was clearly looking at something other than Fran who shook the round pod on her butt. The small girl looked back toward the entrance the boy had come from. She could hear several footsteps inside. They were not Element footsteps and she doubted they belonged to Kihara Yuiitsu who worked alone. She guessed this meant the Kamisato Faction was safe after all.

But a moment later, the pointy-haired boy made a suggestion.

“If you’re still ‘normal’, then hear me out. We can’t stay here! You need to get away from here! You need to go hide with me!!”

“What do you mean?”

“*They’ve changed sides!! The girls of the Kamisato Faction have all joined Kihara Yuiitsu*!!”

It happened earlier in the vast space below the Windowless Building.

“…Is it over?” muttered Kamijou.

Yes, it was over. The great number of boosters that Kihara Yuiitsu had set up as the final fireworks had not ignited. In fact, they had all been devoured by World Rejecter and sent to a supposed new world. That meant everyone was alive. No one had been fried in flames hotter than a crematory.

Except Kamisato Kakeru.

That boy alone was missing.

Only his right hand remained on the floor.

“Ah, ahhhh, ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh…”

The white swimsuit and raincoat girl groaned on the ground.

Kamijou had the same thought again.

It was over. Was there nothing more they could do? Did they have no right to say anything now that it was over? After all, this was too much. Since

Kamisato Kakeru had vanished, it meant there had been more to him than revenge. He could have lived a kinder life in which he could laugh with the friends and acquaintances who adored him, but that bright possibility had strangled him and eternally "banished" him from this world.

"Heh…heh heh."

Then some out of place laughter reached Kamijou's ears.

"Ah ha ha. Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha! Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!"

It was Kihara Yuiitsu.

She had been pinned to the ground, her precious A.A.A. had been mostly stripped away, and only the miserable remnants remained of that swimsuit and lab coat woman. A sticky sound came from the stump of her wrist and something half-liquid and half-string shot out. They connected to the hand that Kamisato Kakeru had taken back but never truly reclaimed. The hand was pulled in and sewn on in the blink of an eye.

She wiggled the fingers as she laughed.

"Yes, yes. That was quite amusing. Between good and evil, it was good, but between like and dislike, it was dislike. You don't see that combination every day! Kamisato Kakeru was blown away by his own power. Well, it didn't go entirely as planned, but I'll overlook that since the end result was the same. I have had my revenge!!"

"You… Give back my brother's hand!!"

"Oh, are you sure you should be saying that?"

The mass murderer pounced at her like a beast, but Kihara Yuiitsu got up and held out her right hand.

World Rejecter was useless against the girls of the Kamisato Faction, but Yuiitsu was not talking about that.

The evil inspiration of a Kihara would not stop there.

“Aren’t you forgetting something? Kamisato Kakeru was blown away by this right hand. That is an eternal exile from which he can never return. But this right hand is still the key.”

“Ah.”

“If you smash me into mincemeat, you might lose that key along with me. I’m asking if you really want to do that. Yes, this comes with an absolute guarantee that there is not even the slightest chance of him returning, but this is still the final key that might just be able to overturn that. …So wouldn’t you be cutting Kamisato Kakeru’s final lifeline if you did that?”

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!! Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

Someone’s sister screamed.

She shouted, roared, and wailed, but she could not lay a finger on her nemesis who was well within arm’s reach.

“All of you, listen uuuuup! If you don’t want to give up on Kamisato Kakeru, then you need to obey me, since I hold the key. Even if it’s impossible now, some advance in technology might be able to bring him back one day. But that doesn’t help you much if this right hand rots away before then, does it?”

……

This was as true reversal.

Had her ridiculous speech even lasted a full minute? But that tiny bit of information was enough to wrap the girls’ hearts in thorns.

Kihara Yuiitsu alone laughed in the center of the despair.

The one who usurped the right hand became the king who ruled over those girls.

Kamisato Kakeru had feared this for so very long and had finally rejected it, but that nightmare had come true.

Was this an extension of her revenge?

“Now, then.”

“!!”

Kamijou Touma was all alone.

He was isolated.

He had been overwhelmed by the atmosphere, but now the pointy-haired boy was the only one separated from the Kamisato Faction.

“I already gave you a chance to leave, so no matter how brutal this gets, it’s your own fault.”

“Dammit…”

“*Kill that brat, girls. That way I can judge the loyalty of my new tools*.”

“Goddammiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit!!”

He did not want to remember what happened after that.

It had been a hellish escape. Each of those girls used a unique system of special techniques, magic, or esper powers and they had become an army from hell to hunt down their poor prey. It felt like a miracle he had made it aboveground alive.

Of course, the girls were probably still hesitating. That may have been what allowed him to survive.

But the scales would tip in the end. They would tip from a stranger like Kamijou Touma to the vanished Kamisato Kakeru. Mass Murderer Salome had seemed relatively unaffected by the Faction, but even she had bit her lips and gained a hopeless expression as she moved her eyes around and seemed unable to stop herself from attacking.

He could not blame them.

What the girls were doing was wrong, but Kamijou could not blame them given the circumstances. After all, he had been there too. If things had been just a little different, Kamisato may not have been lost. If Kamijou was only standing here thanks to that boy's sacrifice, he needed to think about what that meant.

It did not matter if it had been intentional or not.

It was still true that Kamijou Touma's words had built up inside Kamisato Kakeru and bared their fangs against him in the very, very end.

On top of that, he had to think about what to do.

What had Kamisato Kakeru said? Was there anything he could do for that boy!?

"He said to take care of them."

"?"

"At the very end, Kamisato smiled and said to take care of those girls. I won't ignore that!! I won't let Kihara Yuiitsu turn the Kamisato Faction into her playthings!!"

Whether Yuiitsu had known it or not, she had fulfilled Kamisato Kakeru's greatest nightmare.

This was the greatest insult.

Kamijou could not overlook it. He had to prove it was something much kinder and stronger that bound people's hearts together. He felt obligated after being saved by that boy who had worried so very long about this.

And then he heard another voice from overhead.

"I see. So that's what happened to Kamisato-san."

"Claire?"

Kamijou looked up.

The girl had been waiting in midair with the fake A.A.A.'s alcohol boosters, so she had not descended yet. That meant she had not received that shock directly. She had not been bound by that curse directly. She might listen to him like Fran had.

"Good. I can use as much help as I can get. You help out too!"

"Yes, that's right. I need to think about what I can do to help Kamisato-san."

"Um?"

"_______"

Kamijou was confused, but Fran narrowed her eyes.

A moment later, the plant girl was struck by an explosion of light even more frightening than lightning.

Kamijou was blinded by the nearby light.

As he shouted and writhed around, a small hand tugged at his arm.

It was probably Fran, but he could not see her face even from this close.

The pajama hoodie and bikini girl whispered to him.

“Come with me. Claire can regenerate, so that isn’t enough to kill her.”

“What? What was that!?”

“It’s like focusing the sunlight with a magnifying glass. I take the microwaves covering the city and narrow them down onto a single point. The flash you saw wasn’t the microwaves. It was like the light from a heated filament.”

Kamijou could hardly believe it.

Or perhaps he should have praised the plant girl who was so tough that something on that scale was needed to bring her down.

And blinding him kept him from seeing the approaching despair. It felt nice simply to follow the tug on his hand. The Kamisato Faction had joined Kihara Yuiitsu’s side, but this rabbit-ear antennae UFO girl was fine. She would fight alongside him.

“I would like to confirm a few things.”

“Sure!”

“What happened to Kihara Yuiitsu? Are the Elements still active?”

“They were food meant to build up Kihara Yuiitsu’s A.A.A. She completed it, but it was destroyed in the end! And I doubt she’ll remake it from scratch. After all, she’s found a ton of toys she can enjoy a lot more than the A.A.A.!!”

“Then I suppose we no longer need the heat wave to suppress the Elements. …Next, how many of my companions sided with Kihara Yuiitsu?”

“Pretty much all of them!! Salome still seemed hesitant, but she couldn’t fight the possibility of Kamisato returning. Ahh, putting it in words is sending a chill down my spine again. This means we're up against the entire Kamisato Faction that could overpower all of Tokiwadai Middle School!!"

"Then one last question. How exactly do you intend to end this?"

"I'm not sure about the specifics, but I only have on goal."

"Which is?"

"Kihara Yuiitsu is only able to threaten the Kamisato Faction into following her because Kamisato Kakeru was sent to a supposed new world by World Rejecter. Kamisato himself said nothing could ever return from that, but Yuiitsu is intentionally hinting at the possibility. If the right hand is lost, there really will be no chance of him returning, so they have to obey her to keep that possibility alive."

He held his aching eyes and forced his eyelids open.

A new world.

On this entirely unexpected battlefield, only one girl remained to share his fate. He looked to Fran who shook the rabbit-ear antennae on her head and the round pod on her butt.

And…

And…

And…

"We need to bring Kamisato Kakeru back ourselves."

"…"

"That's the only way to free those girls from this curse! It's the only way to end the nightmare Kamisato Kakeru feared more than anything else!! I don't know how to do it, but we can gather everything in the world and find a way to make it work!! That’s the only way to reward his soul for betting his own life on protecting those girls he cared for so much!!!!!”

It was an utterly impossible hope with a mistaken premise.

But he would make it work. He had to.

After all…

“I let it happen.”

Kamijou confessed his own sin.

He confessed it to one of the girls who had adored that vanished boy above all else.

“Yes!! I knew he would almost certainly be erased, but I just stood there and let it happen!! I didn’t try to stop him with my words and I didn’t punch him to hold him back! I thought that was the only way of keeping the girls he cared for from frying, so I stood there obediently and hesitated to reach out my hand! I gave up on thinking and let him make the decision!! He didn’t criticize me for my cowardice, he fulfilled his role, he protected everyone, and he alone vanished!! …I can’t let this happen. Whatever Kamisato Kakeru might have thought, this pathetic boy named Kamijou Touma can’t let this happen!!!!!”

There may not have been another option.

There may not have been any time to think much about it or avoid it.

If he had punched Kamisato and stopped him, they may have all been fried by the rocket boosters.

But…

Even so…

“I won’t hold back any more…”

The boy seemed to spit out the words and seemed to stab himself with them.

He had let it happen. He had given up on him. He had let him die.

He would not let himself forget that sin. And so he spat out the words that he had swallowed and failed to say.

“That wasn’t for his sake and I didn’t hold my tongue to reduce the risk! Like hell I did!! I can say it now. You didn’t really want to disappear, did you!? You wanted to stay with the girls who had followed you so far, didn’t you!? You didn’t want to let anyone else have them and you wanted to keep them for yourself, didn’t you!? We’re just kids who haven’t even lived two decades, so don’t act like you’ve lived for a century and seen everything there is to see! It pisses me off!! Don’t act like you know what you’re talking about while you throw away your own life and yet look so satisfied!! Let your uglier side show, you idiot! That’s what humans are supposed to do! You can accept the ugly feelings that are far from perfect!! You had a future, so what’s wrong with reaching for it!? Just because you had the qualifications for that right hand doesn’t mean anyone will blame you if cling to them and cry that you don’t want to die!! And yet you clearly failed. Self-sacrifice? All you did was let Kihara Yuiitsu manipulate you into running full-speed into a dead end! So I’ll destroy all of this. No matter how cool you tried to make your final moments look, I’ll tear it all apart and drag you up from the depths of hell!! I’ll make the impossible possible and show you a future beyond the ending! I’ll shove you in front of all those girls for an awkward reunion!! Get ready to bow down to them, because I’m coming for you!!”

Those many girls were pursuing him.

Kihara Yuiitsu was manipulating their feelings.

And the boy who supported those girls in their twisted rampage was nowhere to be seen.

But in the midst of that despair, “the kind of normal high school boy one can find anywhere” raised his voice to challenge something invisible.

“To hell with all of that!! Wait for me, Kamisato. I’m done not acting like myself and I’m going to turn this around! *I’ll show this piece of shit world just who Kamijou Touma is!!* If you think what you’ve forced onto us will make even a single person happy, then I’ll destroy that illusion until not even the smallest piece remains!!!!!”

Afterword

If you’ve been buying one volume at a time, welcome back. If you bought them all at once, welcome.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

New Testament has reached Volume 16!! In the Old Testament, this was around where they fought Acqua, wasn’t it? I hope I’ve been able to make even bigger waves than that, but what did you think of the story this time?

The standard form of an Index series story is to have a magician or esper attack the completed stage of Academy City, so it’s pretty rare to have the entire city conquered by the violence of numbers like with the Elements.

As a combination of translucent crystal and mimicry life forms, the Elements use “invisibility” which is quite difficult to use in manga or anime. But when I researched mimicry, I learned that what looks like it to us is oftentimes entirely useless when it comes to bugs hunting each other or is actually sending some kind of signal between the bugs. You sometimes find the world is a much deeper place when you research something.

The method of dealing with them differed between chapters. Sometimes the characters ran around on the rooftops and other times they slaughtered them with great firepower. By switching between schools and shelters between chapters while remaining in Academy City, I was trying to present the problems and tasks in stages while also showing different faces of the same city, but which chapter’s school and shelter spoke to you the most?

The idea that the holder of the right hand rules over the girls has been spoken of since Kamisato appeared, but it finally rose to the surface at the ending.

And of course we also have Kamijou’s response.

You could say something similar about New Testament 9, but I wrote this while thinking that Kamijou Touma's courage to say these things (even when he has no realistic basis for it) points to the real meaning in and reason for having him as the protagonist. "I'll show this piece of shit world just who Kamijou Touma is." That's a line he wouldn't have been able to say so easily in Volume 1. Now, what did you think?

I give my thanks to my illustrator Haimura-san and my editors Miki-san, Onodera-san, and Anan-san. And to continue from last volume, I need to thank Kasai Shin-san for the A.A.A. design. Anyway…Elements! A city full of barricades and wires!! But then there's the girl's swimsuits and the A.A.A. variations!! This was probably a difficult volume for the illustrations. I am truly grateful they all went along with my ridiculous demands.

And I give my thanks to the readers. This one was divided about half and half between the characters and the situations (and not the locations so much), but what did you think? Thank you for reading this far.

It is time to close the pages for now while praying that the pages of the next book will be opened.

And I lay my pen down for now.

Hmm. If you let your desire for revenge waver, I guess you're doomed to "disappear".

-Kamachi Kazuma

Credits

Author: Kazuma Kamachi
Illustrator: Kiyotaka Haimura
Translator: Js06
Editors: EnigmaticRepose, Tact, Snorca, CarVac, Kuroi Hadou, Hiro Hayase, Skies, Cliff
Proofreaders: Tact, CarVac, Xionol
Page Checkers: Saganatsu, Wilfriback